

France's Recalibration in the Black Sea Region



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**New Strategy Center
2026**

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Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României

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France's recalibration in the Black Sea Region / Catherine Neguț. -
București : New Strategy Center, 2026
ISBN 978-606-95859-8-6

Introduction

Strategic autonomy has long been a central reference point in French strategic culture. While often associated with Gaullist traditions of independence and a “third way” in international affairs, the concept itself is broader and more contemporary in scope, reflecting France’s enduring pursuit of sovereign decision-making. Noteworthy strategic autonomy has also become a core concept of the European Union’s external action during the last decade. Historically, this posture viewed Russia as a difficult but necessary dialogue partner within the European security architecture—a view that prioritized mediation to avoid a continent divided by iron curtains. However, Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on the 24th February 2022, was foretold by the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, an event that primarily signaled an alarm-bell for countries on NATO’s and the EU’s eastern flanks and catalyzed a profound transformation in the French strategic imaginary. This war marked a definitive rupture with post-Cold War assumptions, distancing itself from the hope of a partnership with Moscow. Russia has been re-conceptualized from a security interlocutor into a protracted, systemic threat that endangers the very stability of the Euro-Atlantic area. Consequently, the operationalization of French strategic autonomy has undergone a fundamental shift: moving away from a logic of arbitration and equilibrium toward a robust doctrine of deterrence and containment.

Within this new strategic reality, the Black Sea Region (BSR) has emerged as a primary theater of confrontation. No longer viewed as a peripheral maritime space, the BSR is now recognized as the critical nexus where European security, energy corridors, and Russian revisionism collide. Therefore, this paper aims to explain the “how” and “why” behind France’s strategic recalibration in the BSR starting from 2022. Understanding Paris’s role is no longer merely a question of French domestic politics; it is central to evaluating Europe’s collective capacity to manage security on its Eastern Flank—an imperative further intensified by the prospect of a U.S. strategic reorientation.

To analyze this change, the study adopts a structured methodology. It first interrogates the collapse of the Franco-Russian diplomatic track, framing this rupture as the primary catalyst for the Black Sea’s (BS) elevated status within the French security hierarchy. Subsequently, it evaluates France’s operational posture via its strategic anchors in Romania and Bulgaria, alongside a targeted diplomatic surge into the Republic of Moldova and the South Caucasus—theaters defined by contested sovereignty and acute strategic vulnerability. Finally, the paper analyzes France’s regional bilateral dynamics, specifically focusing on the strategic competition and legal constraints defining France–Türkiye relations, as well as the framework of strategic support characterizing France–Ukraine relations.

Romania and Bulgaria as Strategic Anchors

France's increasing involvement in Romania and Bulgaria is less a pursuit of traditional, balanced partnership and more a manifestation of a calculated forward presence strategy. In the present, within the broader landscape of European security, it follows that Romania, and to a lesser extent Bulgaria, are portrayed as operational springboards rather than ends in themselves.

Its relationship with Bulgaria has remained largely functional and compartmentalized, reflecting both opportunities and constraints. While Paris has consistently supported Sofia's Euro-Atlantic integration,¹ the depth of strategic convergence remains limited due to its internal political fragmentation and historically cautious positioning toward Russia, constraining its role in the region.² Trade data from the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC) indicate steady growth in bilateral exchanges over the past decade between the two countries,³ while high-level economic diplomacy—such as the *Mouvement des Entreprises de France* (MEDEF) delegation visit in 2023 and continued engagement with the French-Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce in 2025—suggests a prioritization of long-term market positioning.⁴ While defence cooperation—illustrated by the 2025 Franco-Bulgarian agreement on joint acquisition of 3D surveillance radars integrated into NATO air defence structures—anchors Bulgaria within European defence frameworks,⁵ a clear disparity in French force posture remains visible. Paris has primarily anchored its regional strategy in Romania, opting instead for a more measured, case-by-case security partnership with Sofia. This strategic gap is

further widened by domestic instability; as of late 2025, Bulgaria was still seeking parliamentary approval for the €195 million deal on French 3D radars; the late 2025 budget crisis underscored how internal political fragmentation continues to stall the modernization essential for full regional synergy.⁶ Securing an absolute majority in the April 2026 elections, Rumen Radev's party now holds a mandate to shape a foreign and security policy that remains critical to analyze, especially considering the country's position as a key Black Sea littoral state.

At the same time, it is observed that Romania and Bulgaria are no longer just passive followers of EU policy; they are actively pursuing to be architects in defining the European agenda. By calling Brussels to adopt a "Black Sea strategy", the BS has moved from the periphery to the center of the European security concerns.⁷ France's appointment of a dedicated Ambassador for the Eastern Partnership and the Black Sea, Michaël Roux, reflects the institutionalisation of its strategic engagement in the region and the elevation of the BS to a priority area within French and EU foreign policy.

Romania occupies a distinctive position in France's calculus. The fundamental framework governing bilateral relations is the Franco-Romanian Strategic Partnership, concluded in 2008. Its substance is reflected in the frequency of high-level contacts and the continuity of dialogue at the governmental level. Its location on the Eastern Flank, proximity to the Ukrainian conflict and littoral access to the BS, provide a strategic depth that aligns with Paris's post-2022 security reassessment. As the framework nation for NATO's Mission Aigle, France transitioned its multinational battlegroup in 2025 into a full brigade-level formation at Cincu,

into a full brigade-level formation at Cincu, capable of surging to 4,000 personnel - a nearly threefold increase from its 2022 baseline.⁸ This presence was bolstered by the deployment of a MAMBA (SAMP/T) air-defense battery at Capu Midia, providing essential integrated protection for the Black Sea coast.⁹

Thus, their bilateral cooperation is seen as complementary to NATO, rather than as a challenge for the transatlantic alliance. In addition to its military footprint, their partnership is underpinned by a distinct convergence of cultural alignment and economic structural influence. France's influence is deeply embedded through the Francophonie; with 25% of the population being French-speaking, this linguistic bond creates a foundational layer of institutional trust.¹⁰ Its economy is characterized by a dual structural configuration, combining a pronounced dependence on trade with the core economies of the European Union—most notably Germany, Italy, and France—and an increasingly consolidated pattern of investment integration involving partners from Central and South-Eastern Europe.¹¹ As of late 2025, France ranks as Romania's third-largest foreign investor and fourth-largest trading partner, a position sustained by a high degree of bilateral economic trust that has enabled a broad and diversified French corporate presence, with nearly all CAC 40 companies operating in the Romanian market.¹²

In 2024, Romania's total exports amounted to USD 100.37 billion, directed primarily toward Germany, Italy, and France.¹³ Concurrently, Romania's leading regional partners—Greece, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Bulgaria—substantially expanded their

investment footprint, with direct investments increasing by 64% between 2019 and 2024 to an aggregate value of EUR 10 billion.¹⁴

Notwithstanding shifting trade dynamics, the structural depth of Romania's relationship with Western countries—most notably France—has demonstrated remarkable resilience, transitioning from conventional commerce toward a deeply integrated defense-industrial cooperation. This strategic convergence has enabled defense cooperation to intensify, with a significant inflection point occurring in late 2025: the signing of a EUR 625.6 million contract for Mistral MANPADS (231 launch systems and 934 missiles), concluded under the SAFE (Security Action for Europe) instrument.¹⁵ This trajectory anchors Romania into EU defense mechanisms and has effectively mitigated the fallout of the 2023 Naval Group corvette programme.¹⁶ Moreover, the partnership between Airbus Helicopters and IAR Braşov—centered on the H215M platform and reinforced by the integration of MARTE ER for the Romanian Naval Forces—exemplifies a clear qualitative upgrade.¹⁷ This dynamic must also be understood notably with the potential acquisition of H225M helicopters and Thales Ground Master 200 and 400 radar systems under SAFE mechanism.¹⁸

The projected 2027 operationalization of the Neptun Deep gas project adds a critical infrastructure layer to regional security. The 2025–2030 Romanian Defense Strategy explicitly integrates the protection of these energy assets into its deterrence model.¹⁹ In this context energy and information resilience become central axes for the Transatlantic security architecture, where a Franco-Romanian cooperation on hybrid threats—specifically critical communications and

counter-disinformation— could further suggest that the Black Sea security will increasingly blur the distinction between civil and military domains.



Figure 1.

President Emmanuel Macron and President Nicușor Dan²³

The diplomatic engagements of late 2025— specifically the bilateral meeting with Romania's interim president Ilie Bolojan in February and the official state visit of President Nicușor Dan to the Élysée last December—represent a significant effort that draws a new phase of the Franco-Romanian strategic partnership.²⁰ However, while both governments are actively pursuing to deepen their alliance, their endeavors are being hampered by a rise in anti-establishment sentiment following the 2024–2025 Romanian presidential elections. The previous narratives, fueled by allegations of French and EU interference in the electoral process following the presidential elections in Romania, have temporarily eroded the traditionally high public trust in the Francophile alliance, although both Paris and Bucharest formally dismissed these accusations.²¹ In this image, the key challenge for the country remains in balancing its key role within NATO while simultaneously confronting a surge in internal concerns that question the extent of foreign influence in national decision-making.

The bilateral roadmap serves as the basic institutional framework and foundational pillar of the concrete cooperation between France and Romania. As Ambassador Nicolas Warnery noted, this enduring involvement underscores the robustness of the Franco-Romanian Strategic Partnership and its critical role in upholding European and Euro-Atlantic stability.²²

While the Black Sea remains a primary theater of geopolitical competition, the evolving Franco-Polish alignment is emerging as a structural pillar of European security on the Eastern Flank.²⁴ The Nancy Treaty has elevated the Franco-Polish axis to a profound strategic partnership which represents one of the highest standards of resilience across critical networks.²⁵ This framework complements the broader NATO deterrence architecture, with France contributing an additional layer of strategic autonomy within the alliance. These developments suggest a gradual shift toward strategic complementarity for Romania, given its geographic and operational connection to the BSR. France's deepening engagement with both Bucharest and Warsaw may contribute to a more resilient regional defense architecture, positioning these states as institutional anchors of deterrence and stability. In this context, Romania is balancing integration and resilience across both its economic and defense policies, consistently advocating for the Black Sea's recognition as a central European security space.

France–Russia: From Strategic Ambiguity to Structural Rivalry

The evolution of the bilateral France–Russia has evolved into a clearer stance of competition and deterrence. Eschewing the improbable goal of 'controlling' Russia, Paris has pivoted toward eroding Moscow's capacity for regional destabilization. This evolution has strengthened a convergence of interests with France's regional partners, resulting in shared operational theatres and prompting France to develop a more coherent strategic posture in the region. Implicitly, through the Direction générale des relations internationales et de la stratégie (DGRIS), État-Major des Armées (EMA), and armed forces, the Hexagon is actively monitoring the Black Sea, a positioning step that illustrates the awareness of this location. An institutional brief issued by DGRIS in 2020 explicitly frames this support. Since the deterioration of the European security order following 2014 and its acceleration after 2022, Paris has reinforced its forward military presence through land deployments in Romania and Estonia, sustained naval activity from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, and air policing missions in the Baltic region.²⁶ Thus, the framing leads to a key analytical question: is France consolidating its adversarial approach towards Russia, or instead returning to a strategy of diplomatic hedging ?

Their relationship has long oscillated between pragmatic engagement and strategic caution, reflecting a broader French tradition of seeking autonomy in European security affairs. Until 2022, President E. Macron

embodied this approach through sustained attempts at strategic dialogue with Moscow, inspired in part by Gaullist visions of a pan-European security architecture that would integrate Russia rather than isolate it.²⁷ This posture was not rooted in naïveté, but in a calculation that European stability required channels of communication with Moscow, amid its revisionist impulse.

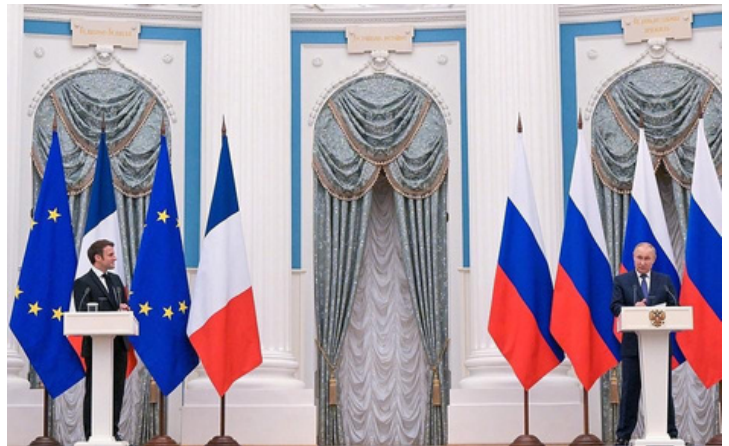


Figure 2. President of Russia, “News Conference Following Russian-French Talks,” photograph, February 8, 2022, <https://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67735>.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 catalyzed a fundamental realignment in French foreign policy. This change, codified later in the 2025 National Strategic Review (RNS), formally identifies Russia as the primary threat to European security.²⁸ The objective is no longer the construction of a shared security architecture, but rather the systematic neutralisation of the Kremlin's capacity to destabilise Europe. Paris views Russian interference with maritime traffic a direct challenge to the principle of freedom of navigation, condemning Moscow's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative. Maritime security is no longer framed through a purely humanitarian lens, but as a proactive effort to prevent the normalization of coercive control over global supply chains.²⁹

Despite the hardening of its security posture toward Russia after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, France's strategy continues to be shaped by structural interdependencies in energy that complicate a clean break. France remains the primary European hub for Yamal LNG—accounting for 41.7% of EU imports in 2025.³⁰ Moreover, the Dunkirk LNG terminal handled roughly 27 % of all Russian LNG imports into Europe in 2024, portraying France as one of the largest European importers that year.³¹ Since 2022, the import of Russian Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) has followed a resilient and increasingly upward trajectory. By 2024, the European share of Russian LNG reached its highest relative levels, exposing a friction point between the EU's stated mandate for total energy decoupling by 2027 and the entrenched structural realities of the global gas market.³² This reality reinforces this structural position and underscores Paris's paradox.

Beyond LNG, French utility data show that between April 2024 and March 2025, approximately 20 % of France's enriched uranium imports (used for a portion of French nuclear power generation) originated from Russia, even as French companies publicly emphasize diversification of suppliers and the development of alternatives.³³ On a geopolitical level, these structural interdependencies inform France's broader assessment of Russia as a systemic competitor, while its cohesive campaign is reflected in the use of tools to influence operations – all calculated to erode the foundation of the rules-based international order. This is most visible in the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa, where Russian expansion—driven by paramilitary networks and

opportunistic diplomacy—is seen as a direct assault on traditional French partnerships.³⁴

Given this illustration, France's post-2022 policy shift manifests not in wholesale economic decoupling but in a pragmatic recalibration marking its foreign policy irreversibly linked to the critical post-war environment. In this sense, engagement is a prerequisite for effective containment, ensuring that European security interests are defended from within the room rather than negotiated in their absence.³⁵

France–Türkiye Relations: Strategic Competition under Legal Constraints

Historically, the Franco-Turkish bilateral relationship has been defined by a complex dialectic between pragmatic cooperation and a discernible friction. This polarization is most acutely manifested across a spectrum of regional flashpoints, notably in the Eastern Mediterranean, where France has positioned itself as the preeminent European counterweight to Turkish maritime assertiveness and its revisionist “Mavi Vatan” doctrine.³⁶ Within this approach, France is positioning itself as a proactive power. Building on the 2021 Franco-Hellenic Defence Agreement, which generated sources of tension with Ankara, the 2024 delivery of Rafale fighter aircraft to Greece constituted an example of defence integration translated into concrete steps.³⁷ However, this alignment soon exposed underlying strains, as France's commitment had to be balanced against its broader interests and pragmatic relationship with Türkiye. In early 2025, Athens urged Paris to cancel the proposed sale of Meteor missiles to Ankara,

fearing a disruption of the regional military balance.³⁸ At the same time, Paris has sought to embed this bilateral dynamic within a wider European security, prompting its allies to reconcile continental and regional security imperatives through the prospective transfer of Mirage 2000-5 aircraft from Greece to Ukraine.³⁹ A comparable source of friction emerged in northern Syria, where France's engagement alongside Kurdish-led forces, particularly the YPG within the Global Coalition Against ISIS, continued to generate tensions with Türkiye.⁴⁰ In this context, statements by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan emphasizing direct coordination with the United States rather than European actors reflect Ankara's broader effort to sideline European influence in theaters it considers within its sovereign sphere of interest.⁴¹

Within the Black Sea theater, a space defined by the rigid legal and structural parameters of the 1936 Montreux Convention, Türkiye has leveraged its role as an indispensable regional mediator in the current geopolitical crisis, balancing alliances with its own national priorities. Through initiatives such as the Black Sea Grain Initiative and the MCM Black Sea mine-clearing task force—which brought together littoral states (Türkiye, Romania, and Bulgaria) to counter mine threats⁴²—Ankara has attempted to position itself as the guardian of the BS status quo. These actions project an image of Türkiye as a stabilizing actor, committed to preserving the functional integrity of the sea. Beyond its maritime posture, the country extends its influence inland using targeted instruments, projecting at the same time kin-state diplomacy, particularly in vulnerable regions such as Moldova's Gagauzia.⁴³ To this end, Türkiye

receives a rare cultural entry point with the Turkic-speaking and Orthodox Christian located in the southern part of the country, limiting Russian exclusivity.

The contemporary Franco-Turkish relationship is defined by a synchronized pursuit of strategic autonomy, a posture that serves simultaneously as a source of friction and a catalyst for pragmatic re-engagement. This "sovereignty-first" logic—historically rooted in the 1968 Gaullist doctrine of Türkiye as a "strategic crossroads"⁴⁴—has matured into a framework of measured restraint. To a certain extent, the persistent Franco-Turkish tensions have constituted for Europe in terms of security, a level of constraint. Yet the war in Ukraine and the centrality of the BS may seem to have created a renewed but still underexploited convergence of interests that could form the basis for a pragmatic re-engagement.⁴⁵ Amidst a volatile U.S. foreign policy and the systemic menaces of the global geopolitical crisis, it is vital for both countries to engage toward an institutionalized cooperation.⁴⁶

The recalibration announced at the September 24, 2025, UN Summit emphasizes functional realism over institutional process. By deepening cooperation in the defense, energy, and trade sectors, Paris and Ankara have created a bilateral bridge designed to bypass systemic bottlenecks and accelerate structural alignment.⁴⁷ This pragmatic alignment was further operationalized during the January 2026 Paris Summit, where Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan joined the meeting of the "Coalition of the Willing." In this realm, Ankara didn't miss to assert its priorities as the gatekeeper of the Straits (the Key)—while France committed to scaling up satellite and

UAV-based surveillance in the Black Sea (the Umbrella).⁴⁸ Furthermore, the 2026 diplomatic engagement between Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and French Minister Jean-Noël Barrot marks a significant rapprochement in the Ankara–Paris axis – moving from an ideological competition in the Eastern Mediterranean toward a comprehensive framework across several critical domains.⁴⁹



Figure 3. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan and French Minister Jean-Noël Barrot⁵⁰

France – Ukraine

The trajectory of Franco-Ukrainian relations between 2022 and 2025 epitomizes a significant turning point in French grand strategy, positioning Paris as a principal architect of European collective security. Facing heightened U.S. engagement, France acted as a strategic catalyst for the continent, spearheading a European "Coalition of the Willing."⁵¹ This image sought to overhaul the continent's security architecture toward a self-sustaining model anchored by long-term, institutionalized support for Kyiv. Facing the current credibility of its role, which has

generated internal fissures, France's position as a coherent strategic actor is also shaped by earlier episodes of domestic political instability, notably the 2025 legislative crisis that exposed divergences in the integration of a cohesive European defence policy.⁵²

This interaction with external strategic ambition constitutes an analytical pivot, since France's defence cooperation with Ukraine has evolved beyond episodic transfers of military equipment toward deep-tier industrial integration, with the establishment of KNDS Ukraine LLC in Kyiv, October 2024.⁵³ Moreover, the 2024 Franco-Ukrainian Security Agreement marked a profound reaffirmation of solidarity which served as a definitive operationalization of a long-term strategic partnership, through multi-year military commitments and defense-industrial localization.⁵⁴ This journey further reached a milestone on November 17, 2025, when Paris and Kyiv signed a ten-year Strategic Pact.⁵⁵ A central pillar of the agreement is the delivery of 100 Rafale F4 fighter jets by 2035 and the deployment of the SAMP/T NG (Next Generation) air defense system.⁵⁶



Figure 4. President Emmanuel Macron and President Volodymyr Zelensky⁵⁷

The Paris Declaration signed on January 6, 2026, by France, the United Kingdom, and Ukraine, may introduce a conditional European-led security framework centered on the proposed Multinational Force – Ukraine (MNF-U).⁵⁷ However, the operationalization of this framework remains interlinked to certain variables: continued U.S. political endorsement, a durable cessation of hostilities and Ankara's willingness to risk its 'gatekeeper' neutrality.⁵⁸ In its 2025 National Strategic Review, France has elevated the strategic importance of the Russian war in Ukraine to European security,⁵⁹ justifying an accelerated defense budget target of €64 billion by 2027.⁶⁰ Another example of impact relies on a significant initiative that has portrayed France as Ukraine's primary intelligence partner, surpassing the U.S. Following President Trump administration's pressures on Ukraine, France seems to have filled a vacuum and currently provides approximately two-thirds of all actionable intelligence to Kyiv.⁶¹

Ultimately, the evolution of the Franco-Ukrainian bond reveals a story of shared resilience and a redefined European identity. While the sophisticated language of "strategic pacts" and "industrial localization" provides the framework, the heart of this relationship lies in a profound commitment: the choice to move past decades of hesitation to become a steadfast guardian of a neighbor's sovereignty, even as Paris grapples with its own internal political growing frictions.

France-Republic of Moldova

France's engagement in the Republic of Moldova illustrates an increasingly relevant dimension of France's broader strategic re-engagement in Eastern Europe and the wider Black Sea. It portrays efforts and commitments to assert influence in sensitive regions adjacent to Russia, and gained renewed significance in the context of heightened regional insecurity. Diplomatic relations between Paris and Chisinau were formally established in 1992 and have been revitalized under President Maia Sandu, aligning a convergence of European aspirations and French foreign policy objectives.⁶²

Reflecting a deepening strategic partnership, France has emerged as an important foreign investor in Moldova, currently ranking seventh in direct foreign investment according to Moldpres.md.⁶³ Beyond capital flows, the country has constantly solidified its role as a pivotal trading partner, providing critical energy and humanitarian assistance to mitigate the systemic shocks triggered by Russian aggression in Ukraine. Last year, a EUR 30 million bilateral energy agreement with the French Development Agency (AFD), further underscored Paris' role in strengthening on a multilateral level Moldova's resilience.⁶⁴ Defense cooperation has also likewise intensified in December 2023, when Moldova acquired a Thales Ground Master 200 (GM200) medium-range air defense radar, enhancing its surveillance capacity against the risk of missile or drone debris from Russian operations.⁶⁵ France also provided initial military aid in November 2023, including personal protective equipment, light infantry weapons, and ammunition, supporting interoperability during joint exercises with EU and NATO.⁶⁶ The March

2024 defense cooperation agreement formalized French support for Moldova's air defense modernization.⁶⁷

Politically, France has actively signaled support for Moldova's European orientation. Ahead of parliamentary elections in September 2025, President Emmanuel Macron's visit to Chisinau affirmed backing for Moldova's pro-European trajectory and publicly denounced Russian propaganda.⁶⁸ However, the efficacy of this diplomacy of presence is continuously challenged by Chisinau's entrenched structural vulnerabilities, remaining exposed to Kremlin leverage through interrelated channels. Firstly, the security of Moldova, and by extension Ukraine's southwestern flank, is defined by a tiered Russian strategy that prioritizes cognitive subversion. The primary operational theater is a pervasive hybrid and information war, where Moscow-aligned proxies frame Western security assistance as a "provocative militarization" designed to entrap Chisinau in the regional conflict.⁶⁹ Consequently, public confidence has been targeted by a systematic campaign of destabilization designed to obstruct Moldova's integration into the European security framework. In tandem, the unresolved conflict in Transnistria serves as a deliberate mechanism used to exert pressure on Moldova's path to the EU.⁷⁰ Moreover, the 2025 election cycle confirmed that Russia has recurrently proved its intentions of destabilization through disinformation and subversion, but the authorities in the Republic of Moldova managed this huge pressure, and the elections showed that Moldova maintains its intention to be part of democratic Europe and that it does not opt for rapprochement with Russia.⁷¹

2024 defense cooperation agreement formalized French support for Moldova's air defense modernization.⁶⁷

France's support for Moldova has moved beyond symbolic gestures to tangible contributions that strengthen Chisinau's resilience. As a response to airspace violations and security dynamics, Paris acknowledged the increasing need to fortify its presence in vulnerable regions adjacent to a context of evolving threats.

The South Caucasus: A Contested Grey Zone

France perceives Moldova and the South Caucasus not as isolated peripheral regions, but as linked zones of strategic competition, where Russian influence challenges European stability and cohesion. Therefore, Paris has transitioned from a normative actor to a strategic "tool", acting in key domains to erode Moscow's regional hegemony. The South Caucasus—a strategic triad consisting of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—functions as the definitive Eurasian land-bridge. By hosting critical energy arteries and transcontinental trade corridors, the region has transitioned from a peripheral zone into a central theater for external powers seeking to capitalize on its unique connectivity and substantial natural resource wealth.

France has strategically leveraged its deep historical, cultural, and diasporic foundations to transform its relationship with Armenia into a robust security partnership. Since 2022, this bilateral tie has transitioned from normative support to a higher-level in defense-industrial

integration, designed to provide Yerevan with an alternative to its traditional reliance.⁷² Defense cooperation has expanded since 2022, including the acquisition of Thales GM200 radars, Safran night vision equipment, and more recently Caesar howitzers.⁷³ The deepening of both countries' security ties has generated a sharp escalation narrative within the region. The Azerbaijani leadership and the Kremlin has consistently denounced French defense-industrial support—most notably the 2024 Caesar howitzer contract as a destabilizing force.⁷⁴ This diplomatic friction was further compounded by a sophisticated hybrid dimension. Parallel to conventional tensions, France and Armenia have been forced to navigate an integrated disinformation battlefield throughout 2024 and 2025, frequently attributed to Russian and Azerbaijani state-aligned actors.⁷⁵

France's engagement in Azerbaijan remains comparatively limited and is mainly represented through corporate energy investment. The French company TotalEnergies maintains a minority presence in key Azerbaijani energy infrastructure, notably through its stake in the Absheron gas field—operational since 2023—and its participation in the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline.⁷⁶ While these assets anchor France economically in the country, they do not translate into the systemic influence exercised by the United Kingdom, whose position is structurally reinforced by BP's dominant role in the country's energy sector.⁷⁷ BP's operations at the Shah Deniz natural gas field and the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline are fundamental to Europe's energy diversification strategy. In June 2025, BP reinforced its commitment to regional stability through the Shah Deniz Compression project, a \$2.9 billion initiative designed to sustain gas exports.⁷⁸ The strategic weight of this partnership is underscored by

the Azerbaijani economy's structural dependency on hydrocarbons, which historically account for nearly half of its GDP and over 90% of export revenue.⁷⁹

Bilateral relations between Paris and Baku have nevertheless been strained by France's increasingly explicit political and defense support for Armenia. Azerbaijani officials have repeatedly criticized what they perceive as France's loss of neutrality in the South Caucasus, arguing that this stance complicates normalization efforts, underscoring the pragmatic—yet politically fragile—nature of Franco-Azerbaijani relations.⁸⁰

In parallel, France's relationship with Georgia is rooted in a legacy of high-stakes diplomacy, most notably established during the 2008 Russo-Georgian War.⁸¹ In the decade since, Paris has transitioned from an emergency mediator to a foundational partner in Georgia's institutional modernization and socio-economic transformation, acting as a primary advocate for the country's sovereignty and Euro-Atlantic integration. The French Development Agency (AFD), which has maintained a permanent presence in Tbilisi since 2017, and an agreement formalized in June 2021, permitted the allocation of approximately €483 million through 2024 to support diverse sectors.⁸² However, the country has become a laboratory for external interference, where the subtle tools of political destabilization from the marginalization of pro-European voices such as President Salomé Zourabichvili, former French diplomat, portrayed Georgia as a "test case" of Russian hybrid warfare.⁸³ This internal friction revealed a painful paradox: the Georgian people's aspirations and a landscape marked by a sophisticated "strategic capture," designed to turn the country's democratic mechanisms against its own sovereignty.

Since the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Georgia's role in regional trade has undergone a significant and controversial transformation. Driven by the necessity to secure alternative markets, Georgia—alongside Armenia—has emerged as a strategic intermediary for Russian trade.⁸⁴ In the wake of the war in Ukraine, Georgia has experienced a sharp, yet contradictory, economic surge: Georgia's economic reliance on Russia accelerated significantly, with inflows from remittances, tourism, and exports reaching \$2 billion in the first half of 2023 alone.⁸⁵ This surge saw Russia-linked income jump from 11.7% to 14.2% of Georgia's GDP, driven in part by the influx of Russian IT professionals and the opportunistic facilitation of trade.⁸⁶

Despite consistent French support for Georgia's European aspirations, the path toward EU accession is increasingly obstructed by internal political fragmentation. The adoption of controversial legislation and the ruling party's perceived "pragmatic" alignment with Russia have created a significant divergence from Western norms.⁸⁷ In the South Caucasus, France's influence is uneven and primarily political-diplomatic in nature, but the absence of binding security guarantees further limits its capacity to act as a unilateral stabilising actor.

From the Black Sea to European Security

France shares with its Black Sea partners numerous strategic interests, which translate into commitments across shared theatres of operation.

A. France's Nuclear Doctrine : Regional and global implications

In March 2026, President Emmanuel Macron introduced a significant shift in France's nuclear strategy, officially designated as "forward deterrence" (dissuasion avancée).⁸⁹ This doctrinal evolution is a direct response to the contemporary geopolitical landscape, characterized by an increasingly aggressive Russian posture, a volatile security landscape in the Middle East and a growing uncertainty regarding the long-term nature of U.S. security commitments. By adopting this initiative, France explicitly seeks to fill a perceived deterrence gap within Europe.

A defining characteristic of this doctrine is its emphasis on deepened cooperation with a select group of European partners, including Germany, Poland, the United Kingdom, the Benelux and Nordic states. This advanced deterrence manifests through the potential for temporary deployments of French nuclear-capable assets to allied territories and the initiation of joint nuclear exercises,⁹⁰ such as the landmark 2026 Franco-German declaration.⁹¹ Even as France spearheads the integration of a European defense identity, it maintains an unwavering line regarding its nuclear deterrent. Paris views its strategic arsenal as the ultimate guarantee of national and European survival, ensuring that final command remains an exclusively sovereign prerogative.

Continuing within this landscape, the Eastern Flank presents a diverse range of strategic responses. Poland has emerged as a proactive participant, signaling a willingness to advance the nuclear deterrence programme with the Hexagon.⁹² Conversely, Romania has adopted a more cautious posture, President Nicușor Dan affirming that Bucharest will continue to rely on the established U.S. nuclear umbrella within NATO rather than hosting French assets. However, Bucharest remains diplomatically



« Notre pays détient cette arme hors du commun qu'est l'arme nucléaire et il en fait le socle de sa sécurité. Si nous devons utiliser notre arsenal, aucun État, si puissant soit-il, ne pourrait s'y soustraire ; et aucun, si vaste soit-il, ne s'en remettrait. »

Emmanuel Macron

Figure 5. "Our country possesses exceptional weapons: nuclear weapons, which form the foundation of our security. If we were to use our arsenal, no State, however powerful, could escape it; and no State, however vast, could recover."⁸⁸

engaged in the extended deterrence framework, with its final level of participation pending a comprehensive review by the Supreme Council of National Defence (CSAT).⁹⁴

The evolution observed of this contemporary doctrine signals a broader recalibration that extends to the Middle East and seeks to underpin a more assertive, European-led response to multidirectional security threats, where France acts as a leading power. Its posture was further emphasized and operational visible in early 2026, when mounting security concerns in the High North led to the deployment of European contingents to Greenland.⁹⁵ Beyond the European continent, the Élysée's recalibration demonstrates constantly a collective capacity to secure strategic theaters and respond to systemic disruptions – an approach that aims to further validate its stance.

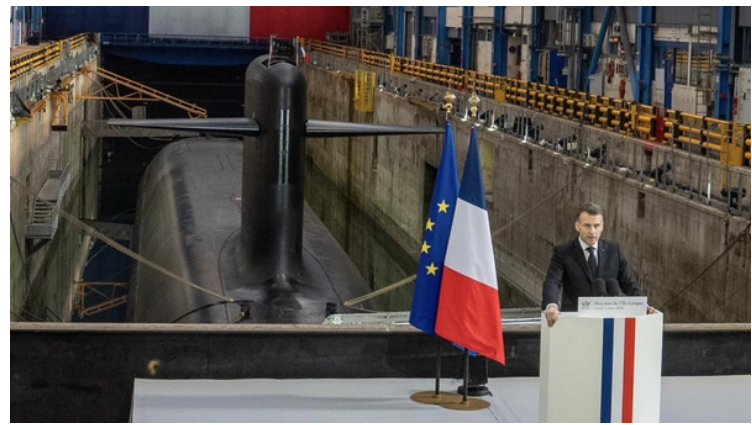


Figure 6. President Emmanuel Macron⁹⁶

B. Political Determinants of French Security Policy

Nonetheless, French engagement in the BS remains a function of presidential prerogative. The French semi-presidential system establishes a core role for the President in designing the country's foreign policy. In this sense, the March 2027 presidential elections represent a critical variable that could fundamentally alter the trajectory of Paris's bilateral and multilateral relations. This opens up multiple scenarios for a future French Black Sea strategy.

While a centrist administration favors a multilateral integration approach and the proposed Multinational Force – Ukraine (MNF-U), a nationalist-populist shift in Paris could

reduce regional deployments to mere symbolic deterrence, further straining the partnership with key geopolitical partners, such as Bucharest. Under a centrist presidency, France is expected to institutionalize its trajectory of deepened engagement along NATO's Eastern Flank and within broader European defense architectures. This posture is evidenced by Paris's leadership in multilateral reassurance initiatives and the codification of a bilateral security pact with Kyiv—an arrangement predicated on the view that Ukrainian stability is a prerequisite for Euro-Atlantic peace. It is highly probable that a successor to Macron would maintain this momentum, ensuring that the shift toward high-intensity readiness and eastern engagement remains a cornerstone of French grand strategy.

Conversely, the ascension of a far-right or far-left presidency—given current political momentum and preliminary polls—would likely trigger a fundamental reconfiguration of France's strategic priorities. In an effort to bolster the diplomatic credibility of the Rassemblement National (RN), a sovereigntist party, Jordan Bardella has reaffirmed France's international commitments and signaled a readiness to oppose Russian aggression;⁹⁷ However, it remains notably reluctant to intensify military aid, arguing that excessive support could trigger an escalatory spiral with Moscow.⁹⁸ Parallel to this, the RN has moderated its alignment with Trumpian populism in favor of a more guarded international posture ahead of upcoming domestic electoral contests.⁹⁹ At the same time, recent developments—Jordan Bardella's outreach to Giorgia Meloni in Milan—highlight an attempt to normalize and broaden its international profile, despite Meloni's clear Atlanticist and pro-European orientation and her distinct stance.¹⁰⁰ The party is increasingly

seeking political respectability, aligning itself with more traditional conservative reference points and signaling openness toward business elites.¹⁰¹ A key question remains how the RN will position itself in relation to President Emmanuel Macron's defense agenda.

Given France's central role within the European Union and NATO, any shift in the direction of its foreign and defense policy following the next presidential election will be considered with utmost attention by its partners after this important electoral episode. Such a scenario could dilute the intensity of security cooperation with frontline partners along the Eastern Flank, as domestic priorities take precedence, although such anticipations may be too early to call.

Conclusion

Since the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Black Sea has evolved into a central theater of instability, reshaping both the regional strategic calculus and broader global security dynamics. Moscow's increasing militarization contains the intention of projecting power towards the Eastern Mediterranean, compelling littoral states and external actors to maintain adaptive and sustained deterrence postures in response to its actions. In 2025, the European security landscape has reached a decisive juncture, driven by a "double shock": the persistent war of attrition in Ukraine and a fundamental shift in American strategic priorities.

While a reluctant U.S. remains the provider of core NATO capabilities, the French footprint exemplifies a shift toward shared security responsibilities. Moreover, the ReArm Europe initiative and the SAFE instrument signal a

paradigmatic shift in the Union's defense and financing architecture, transitioning toward a more integrated industrial approach. Preliminary 2025 data underscore Romania's central role in this new framework, with a tentative allocation of approximately €16.7 billion, a figure that positions Bucharest as the second beneficiary country¹⁰² with established military powers such as France (€16.2 billion) and is exceeded only by Poland's €43.7 billion commitment.¹⁰³

The operational lessons derived from the Black Sea theater increasingly converged with structural transformations across the European security architecture. Adding to this, the U.S. 2025 National Security Strategy emphasized a renewed outline for the Transatlantic Alliance, calling upon our European partners to assume greater responsibility for their regional security and to lead independent initiatives. The concept of "NATO 3.0," as articulated by Elbridge Colby, Under Secretary of War for Policy, reflects this position, stating that European allies should assume "primary responsibility for the conventional defense of Europe."¹⁰⁵ The Franco-German relationship remains the central driver of EU strategic direction, yet it is increasingly characterised by divergent conceptual approaches. On one hand, France tends to conceptualise European integration as an instrument of geopolitical power projection, whereas Germany approaches it primarily as a framework for managing interdependence and ensuring economic and political balance.¹⁰⁶ At the same time, in response to these requirements, both nations have significantly adjusted their defense outlays: Germany's defense expenditure reached 2.1% of GDP by 2025,¹⁰⁷ meeting NATO guidelines for the first time in decades, while France maintained a consistent commitment at 2.07%.¹⁰⁸ What is more, Berlin has articulated the ambition to

build the most powerful conventional military force in Europe by 2039, a transformation underpinned by a comprehensive long-term strategy.¹⁰⁹ This approach, driven by the country's intention to assume greater responsibility within NATO and European defence, is expected to consolidate Berlin's position as the continent's leading security provider. In this evolving context, it remains to be seen how the future French president will manage and respond to the growing German role in the military domain, both within Europe and beyond.

Central to France's recalibration—reiterated after 2022—is the objective of containing Russian expansionism and fortifying NATO's Eastern Flank through the projection of credible hard power and the protection of vital maritime and energy infrastructure. Through a multi-layered approach, Paris is solidifying its regional footprint, ranging from anchoring its military posture in Romania, to deepening defense ties with Bulgaria and providing sustained military and reconstruction assistance to Ukraine. Nevertheless, this reorientation necessitates a careful balancing approach with Türkiye, whose role as the custodian of the Turkish Straits continues to be a cornerstone of the Black Sea. Given the quality of Franco-Romanian and Polish-Romanian relations, as well as France's acknowledged involvement on NATO's Eastern Flank, it appears logical to pursue an integrated and balanced strategic approach between the Baltic and Black Sea regions, taking into account the indivisible security compact they represent for Europe. In this context, formalizing France's relations with both Romania and Poland at a comparable level, would signal a long-term commitment by all three states to jointly address security challenges on Europe's Eastern Flank, while contributing to a more

structured and coherent European security architecture. In light of the strategic partnership between Romania and Poland, the Nancy Treaty is perceived in Bucharest as a strong political signal and a benchmark of strategic recognition. At the same time, Romania is closely monitoring this development with significant interest, particularly in the context of its own strategic partnership with France, and may seek a comparable level of institutionalized cooperation. Moreover, such a demarche will be consonant with France's own Black Sea strategy, probably the most structured at the level of a European member state, providing it with a strong basis in the alliance with Romania.

Beyond formal state-level agreements, the vitality of the France-Romania Strategic Partnership is deeply rooted in the continuous intellectual exchange between their respective defense and foreign policy communities. By fostering a collaborative ecosystem of think tanks and experts, both nations have moved past mere diplomatic formality to develop a shared cognitive framework for interpreting regional and global threats.

Beyond this basin, the South Caucasus represents a secondary yet integral front in France's broader containment approach.

Last but not least, one must take into account the overall impact of the intervention by the United States and Israel against Iran—whose outcome is yet to materialize—on the security environment of the wider Black Sea region, as well as the resulting consequences for France's strategic approach to this area, and more broadly for the European Union and NATO. As evidence of France's active engagement in addressing the challenges posed by the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, particular attention should be given to the maritime

navigation initiative conference held in Paris in 2026, co-chaired by President Emmanuel Macron and Prime Minister Keir Starmer. This initiative underscored the commitment of France and its partners to safeguard their interests while pursuing a robust and lasting resolution to the conflict through diplomatic means, with the aim of ensuring peace and security across the region.¹¹⁰ Considering France's tradition of strategic thinking, one must count on its contribution to the adaptation processes at the level of EU and NATO entailed by an environment of unprecedented challenges.

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ISBN 978-606-95859-8-6

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