

23/03/2023

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**BLOG**  
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# Relations with Russia: France's unique position



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In its response to the war in Ukraine, France maintains the unique position that it has always adopted in European affairs. “France never does anything like everyone else.” This is the immediate irritation that French policy causes among its partners, whether in relation to Ukraine, NATO, US power, Russia or to the world order at large. This is the case now more than ever before. This is why French diplomatic initiatives trigger surprise, disbelief, criticism and sometimes but more seldom admiration.

What are the tenets of this unique position that our partners are prone to condemning? The first concerns NATO: it is common knowledge that Paris is not an enthusiastic supporter. Above all, it was its opposition to NATO's enlargement at the 2008 Bucharest Summit that was a subject of debate. France and Germany saw the accession of new members in the east as a red line for Russia that should preferably be left uncrossed. **Nobody will ever know if NATO's enlargement to Ukraine in 2008 would have saved the country from Russia attack fifteen years later, in 2022, or if this decision would have resulted in war with Russia fifteen years earlier.** Those who back then thought Putin was a realistic leader, not the bloodthirsty revenge-driven person we see today, have to understand that through France's veto, NATO avoided a dangerous provocation

of Russia at the time. Those who, on the contrary, are convinced that Putin has always been an imperialist despot should also applaud NATO's caution, which denied him the perfect excuse to invade Ukraine in 2008. The country had recently been liberated from the Soviet yoke (in August 1991) and was most certainly weaker and less prepared for resistance than it is today.

The second criticism levelled at France concerns **its view of Russia as a major power and its obsession with the channel of dialogue between Paris and Moscow**. Emmanuel Macron carries the legacy of all his predecessors, preoccupied to varying degrees with building a common European security architecture with Russia. A few months prior to the Russian invasion, he once again proposed to make this a political priority at the European Council meeting of June 2021. In the weeks leading up to the invasion and for a long time afterwards, Macron made many phone calls to Putin, sometimes in a very ostentatious way, with a view to leaving the door open for dialogue and negotiation. One of his most controversial statements was made in June 2022, when he explained that Putin was making a historic mistake but that Russia "should not be humiliated". While across Europe everyone was emotionally pledging their unfailing support for Kyiv, the French head of State sent shockwaves with this historical perspective (hinting at the way post-WWI Germany had been experienced the Treaty of Versailles) and long-term realpolitik. "Calls to avoid humiliation of Russia can only humiliate France and every other country that would call for it," commented the Ukrainian foreign minister, followed by many of his Baltic and East-European colleagues. It is true that as unspeakable images of the atrocities committed by the Russians against Ukrainian children and civilians were received, Macron's choice of words was more than tactless.

The French President got the message and from last September adopted the language common to Western nations. At the annual Munich Security Conference in February 2023, he reassured everyone by stating that he wished to see "Ukraine's victory" and "Russia's defeat". However, he did not deviate from his long-term strategic vision: "I don't think, like some, that Russia should be totally defeated, attacked on its soil. These observers want, above all, to crush Russia. This has never been France's position, and it never will be".

Is this one mistake too many? Is this what makes France's unique position an impairment rather than an asset? The answer to this question is no, particularly if the following questions are key for the future: 1) Is it a mistake to distinguish, as France does, between Putin, a war criminal, and Russia, a European power for all time? 2) Is it foolish to remember that **we cannot destroy a nuclear power**? 3) Is it realistic to wait for a democratic regime to be established in Moscow to accept the resumption of relations with Russia? 4) Is it not necessary to attempt to articulate a short-term vision –Putin's defeat is desirable– and a long-term strategy –the relationship with Russia is inevitable ?

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