Check for updates

Research article

Cooperation and Conflict
1–26
© The Author(s) 2026
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/00108367261492861
journals.sagepub.com/home/cac
Sage

Transforming strategic culture: France after the Russian invasion of Ukraine

Olivier Schmitt[1]

Abstract

This article asks whether Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine constitutes a critical juncture for French strategic culture. It argues that the answer is yes, but unevenly. Building on a dynamic, non-essentialist conception of strategic culture as a constellation of narratives and practices, the article distinguishes between two intertwined levels: the political–strategic level (national role conceptions, autonomy, deterrence, and institutional authority) and the operational–tactical level (service cultures, doctrine, force models, and professional heuristics). Methodologically, it applies discourse and narrative analysis to trace three dimensions of change: narrative shifts, institutional recalibration, and doctrinal contestation. The findings show the strongest critical-juncture dynamics at the political–strategic level, where Russia is reframed as a structural threat, and strategic autonomy is increasingly linked to European resilience and deterrence credibility. In the nuclear domain, the doctrinal core remains largely continuous, but recent presidential discourse signals significant institutional and narrative expansion of the European role of French deterrence. Civil–military relations are more ambiguous, with 2015 appearing as an earlier initiating shock and 2022 acting mainly as an accelerator. At the operational–tactical level, 2022 re-ranks preparedness and intensifies doctrinal contestation, but without yet producing a settled new force-model equilibrium.

Keywords

France, strategic culture, military, defense policy

[1]Institute for Military Operations, Royal Danish Defence College, Copenhagen, Denmark

Corresponding author:
Olivier Schmitt, Institute for Military Operations, Royal Danish Defence College, Ryvangs Allé 1, 2100 Copenhagen, Denmark.
Email: olsc@fak.dk

Introduction

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 acted as a powerful catalyst for rethinking strategic paradigms across Europe. In France, the crisis challenged assumptions and accelerated emerging shifts within what can be understood as the country's strategic culture. At the same time, it exposed a persistent ambiguity: France is frequently portrayed as a state whose strategic identity is anchored in deep continuities (sovereignty, autonomy of decision, nuclear deterrence, and a distinct claim to leadership); yet, the post-2022 period has also produced visible adjustments in threat perceptions, alliance positioning, and European security initiatives.

This article takes that ambiguity as a starting point to explore whether the 2022 invasion of Ukraine constitutes a critical juncture for French strategic culture. While existing scholarship on French post-2022 defense policy adjustments treats strategic culture as a permissive but constant environment (Weber, 2025), this article interrogates potential changes in the strategic culture itself. To answer the research question, the article adopts a dynamic, non-essentialist view of strategic culture. Strategic culture is now widely understood as a constellation of narratives and practices related to the use of force, produced through discursive constructions, shaped by institutional constraints, and rooted in historically sedimented repertoires. The French case is particularly suited to this approach, because many of its "enduring" strategic motifs (such as *grandeur*) are themselves best understood as socially constructed and repeatedly re-legitimized through historical references and crisis narratives. The article argues that 2022 was, indeed, a critical juncture for the French strategic culture, but that its effects are still uneven and being renegotiated, which is probably to be expected only 4 years after the events (at the time of writing).

Building on this understanding, the article introduces a further distinction between two intertwined but analytically separable levels of strategic culture: the political–strategic and the operational–tactical. The political–strategic level encompasses national narratives about France's role in the world, institutional frameworks governing the use of force, and broad patterns of societal tolerance or engagement with military power. The operational–tactical level pertains to the modalities of force employment and is the domain of the armed forces. While most research tends to privilege one level or the other, this article argues that their interaction is central to assessing whether a critical juncture has occurred.

Methodologically, the article operationalizes "critical juncture" through discourse analysis. It analyzes how key actors frame the crisis, contest strategic meanings, and link interpretations to institutional and doctrinal trajectories. The study, therefore, examines three interrelated, observable dimensions of change across both levels: (1) narrative shifts (changes in dominant storylines about threat, autonomy, Europe, and deterrence); (2) institutional recalibration (changes in how authority, coordination, and civil–military roles are justified and organized); and (3) doctrinal contestation (competition over preferred concepts of force employment and force model priorities). A critical-juncture interpretation becomes more plausible when post-2022 discourse shows not only new formulations but also heightened contestation and signs of stabilization in authoritative texts, strategic reviews, organizational routines, and doctrinal vocabularies.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section develops a discourse-based framework for testing whether 2022 meets the criteria of a critical juncture in strategic-cultural terms, and clarifies the two-level architecture and the three dimensions of change. The methodology section then specifies the corpus, sampling, and coding strategy used for the discourse analysis. A concise pre-2022 baseline establishes what would count as continuity or change. The empirical sections analyze post-2022 developments at the political–strategic level and the operational–tactical level, before the conclusion returns directly to the research question and assesses whether 2022 should be understood as a critical juncture for French strategic culture in full, in part, or only in certain domains.

The concept of strategic culture

The history of the concept of strategic culture is well-charted, and there is broad agreement that a fourth wave of strategic culture research is underway. This wave shifts from static, deterministic understandings of culture toward a dynamic, reflexive, and practice-oriented perspective. It critically engages earlier generations by emphasizing how strategic culture is constructed, contested, and instrumentalized within and across societies (Bloomfield, 2012).

Further enriching this perspective, some scholars emphasize that strategic culture is composed of subcultures that may coexist, overlap, or compete within a given society. This highlights internal complexity and diversity: societies are rarely homogeneous in their strategic outlook. Authors such as Libel (2020) and Götz and Staun (2022) stress how competing subcultures reflect different interests, identities, and strategic priorities. These subcultures can also be strategically instrumentalized by elites seeking political gains, leveraging specific narratives to mobilize support, legitimize policies, or marginalize opponents (Schmitt, 2012).

Definitions of strategic culture abound in the academic literature and must grapple with familiar questions: Is culture "real" or in the eye of the beholder? How should it be bounded to be analytically useful (and not a stereotypical cliche)? How is culture expressed in attitudes and behaviors? How does culture change? And whose culture matters to analyze military–strategic affairs? Without repeating those debates (for an overview, see Lock, 2018), this article understands strategic culture as a set of narratives and practices related to military and strategic affairs that constitute shared references used in public discourses to frame debates and attitudes toward military–strategic issues.

This definition has several advantages. First, it breaks down "culture" into narratives and practices (in the sociological sense), reducing the risk of essentialism. Second, it foregrounds contestation and, therefore, the possibility of instrumentalization and change by key actors. Third, it does not limit those actors to political–military elites but also recognizes that strategic culture can be framed, mobilized, and contested by societal and citizen groups. Fourth, it remains agnostic about where strategic culture is located: the highest level of a ministry or the level of a battalion are equally valid sites of investigation.

This article subscribes to the understanding of strategic culture as a contested field shaped by competing subcultures. However, it adds an extra layer by distinguishing between the political–strategic and the operational–tactical levels of analysis. This

distinction is not merely conceptual: it reflects institutional and professional divides within national security governance. Much scholarship mobilizing strategic culture tends to treat preferences for the use of force and the modalities of its application in the same analytical register. By contrast, the core premise here is that disentangling these levels allows the analysis to locate change with greater precision and to trace how ideas and practices travel across domains.

Here, the political–strategic level is understood as encompassing the broader motivations, justifications, and guidance regarding the use of force, and includes actors, such as political–military elites, as well as civil society. This level is home to ideas, such as sovereignty, European autonomy, nuclear deterrence, and global influence. It also encompasses the institutional configurations (executive authority, parliamentary oversight, and bureaucratic routines) through which these narratives are enacted. The actors at the political–strategic level are diverse: they can encompass policy elites (civilian and military), professional politicians, and civil society activists. The fault lines can be different within those groups, depending on the context. Sometimes, the fault lines will exist between different professional communities (for example: civilian vs military elites). Other times, the fault line will match policy preferences regardless of professional backgrounds. This divergence among policy preferences can sometimes match political affiliations (Hofmann and Martill, 2021), but not necessarily. It is thus fundamentally an empirical question to ascertain the different sub-groups competing for cultural strategic dominance. As such, it is necessary to study the narratives underlying both the political discourses on what the international role of the country should be and the role of military power in that regard. Second, it is important to consider the institutional provisions that allow the use of force, constitutional provisions, and bureaucratic routines of the relevant institutions. Third, one must consider political practices and societal tolerance toward the armed force.

By contrast, the operational–tactical level is where strategic culture becomes embodied in military practices, doctrines, and professional heuristics. It is here that units train, deploy, and interpret mission requirements, often in ways that reflect their own organizational histories and subcultures. This level is primarily populated by uniformed actors and is shaped through socialization, deployment experience, and service-specific traditions. Scholars have used the notion of military culture, defined as

> a core set of beliefs, attitudes, and values that, through the process of socialization, become deeply embedded within an army and guide the way in which it manages its internal and external lives, interprets its tactical and operational objectives, and learns and adapts. (Ruffa, 2018: 3)

In this article, I refrain from using the terms “military culture” or “organizational culture” (used, for example, by Mansoor and Murray, 2019) to avoid a strict separation between the different levels: the core claim is that the political–strategic level of strategic culture shapes the operational–tactical level, and vice versa. However, because I limited the operational–tactical level to a single actor (the military), I accept the understanding and definition of military culture, although I eschew using the term for practical reasons. Similar to the political–strategic level, the operational–tactical level comprises a

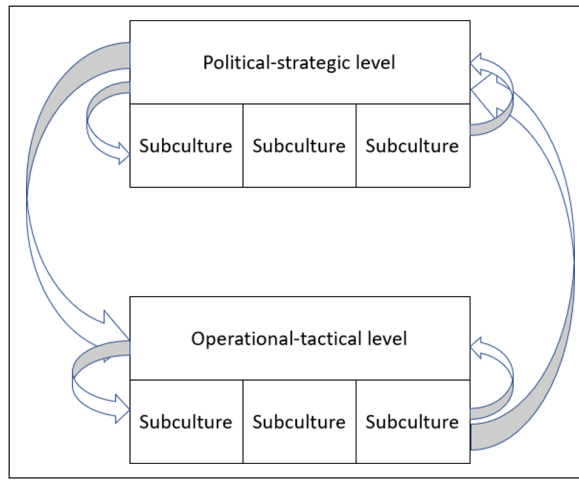

Figure 1. Conceptualization of strategic culture.

diversity of subcultures that can be in competition with each other. For example, Linn (2008 [2007]) identifies three subcultures within the US Army: the "guardians," the "heroes," and the "managers." All three have different understandings of the institution's past, of the challenges facing the United States, and, above all, of the means to meet them. More generally, each service in the US armed forces is recognized to have a specific culture shaping the way they envision the use of force, or civil–military relations (Donnithorne, 2018). Subcultures can develop across services, functional communities, and units, and may compete over what constitutes appropriate force employment and what lessons should be drawn from past operations. At this level, it is relevant to study (1) the narratives and myths sustained by the organization about itself (especially about its past), (2) organizational practices and routines, and (3) shared "military heuristics" about the ideal use of force, whether codified in doctrine or reproduced informally within the profession (Sjøgren, 2024).

The relationship between the two levels is recursive rather than hierarchical, as shown in Figure 1 above. Political–strategic narratives shape the doctrinal and operational frameworks within which military actors function, but military practices and subcultures also feed back into political narratives and institutional reforms by shaping what is operationally feasible, fiscally sustainable, and institutionally credible. There is no need to resolve an "egg-or-chicken" question about which level came first; the empirical task is to trace the mechanisms through which political–strategic choices are translated into force employment and how operational experiences and professional debates, in turn, reconfigure what is deemed politically possible.

This recursive relationship is also asymmetric in tempo, because the two levels differ in their adjustment costs. Political–strategic meaning is carried by narratives, speeches, and strategy documents, which can be re-linked relatively quickly because the sunk costs of changing them are comparatively low: a president can re-narrate autonomy or reframe

an adversary within a single address. Operational–tactical change, by contrast, is gated by procurement cycles, finite budget envelopes, force structure, and inter-service bargaining, so doctrine and force models adjust with a lag and through contestation even once the dominant narrative has moved. Three mechanisms, in particular, slow the operational level: the institutional legacy of two decades of expeditionary operations, sedimented in promotion, training, and equipment; inter-service competition over a constrained resource base; and the temporal inertia of capability programs. The expectation that follows is one of differential adaptation: after a shock, narrative and institutional recalibration should outrun doctrinal and force-model change, producing uneven rather than uniform transformation across the two levels.

Hence, a claim about strategic–cultural change after 2022 cannot be inferred from elite rhetoric alone or from doctrinal debates alone. It must specify where change is expected to appear (political–strategic, operational–tactical, or both), how it travels across levels, and what observable markers indicate that new interpretations are stabilizing rather than remaining rhetorical. To analyze processes of change in strategic culture, this article adopts a broadly historical-institutionalist intuition: change is more likely when critical junctures occur, that is, periods of crisis or doubt often triggered by external events that introduce novelty and uncertainty into pre-existing narratives and practices (Collier and Munck, 2022). Critical junctures can facilitate strategic–cultural evolution, because they destabilize settled assumptions, elevate previously marginal ideas, and open space for competing interpretations of what security requires.

However, not every shock is a critical juncture in the strong sense. Wars and crises may generate policy adaptation without producing path-altering change. For a shock to qualify as a critical juncture for strategic culture, it should be associated with (1) heightened uncertainty and interpretive openness, (2) visible contestation among alternative frames and prescriptions, and (3) some degree of institutionalization of a newly dominant interpretation through strategy documents, budgeting priorities, organizational routines, or doctrinal revisions. Understood this way, a critical juncture opens a period of contested and potentially uneven adaptation; it does not guarantee a single, settled outcome, and its effects may consolidate at some levels while remaining contested at others. Critical junctures are also never purely material. Crises do not speak for themselves; they must be interpreted. The translation of shocks into durable change, therefore, depends on actors, such as influential politicians, senior military leaders, experts, and civil society voices, who provide interpretations, justify choices, and mobilize support. Neither state institutions nor societal actors can respond coherently to material change unless they first interpret it through cognitive and normative lenses.

Strategic–cultural change, therefore, has a dual dimension, material and ideational. On the one hand, concrete events must occur to challenge established assumptions and perceived realities. On the other hand, these events must be complemented by discursive processes, whereby key actors mobilize symbols, historical analogies, narratives, and rhetorical devices to frame debate in ways that either facilitate or obstruct change (Libel, 2016; Ruffa, 2018). The interplay between material catalysts and their discursive framing is central to understanding when and how strategic cultures evolve.

The article operationalizes strategic–cultural change after 2022 through three families of observable phenomena. First, narrative shifts refer to changes in dominant narratives about threat, responsibility, autonomy, alliances, and the role of force. They are visible in recurring frames, metaphors, historical analogies, and shifts in how key ideas are linked (e.g. autonomy framed primarily as distance from allies vs autonomy framed as European capacity-building within alliance structures). Because strategic culture includes both ideas and practices, narrative shifts matter not only as rhetoric but also as a means of legitimizing institutional and doctrinal choices. Second, institutional recalibration refers to changes in how authority relationships, coordination mechanisms, and bureaucratic routines are justified and enacted. It includes shifts in how civil–military roles are narrated, which institutions are framed as solutions or obstacles, and how strategic guidance is translated into planning and resourcing priorities. It also encompasses changes in how oversight and legitimacy are discussed, not only changes in formal rules. Third, doctrinal contestation refers to competition over preferred concepts of force employment and future force design. It is visible in professional debates, doctrinal publications, and the language used to legitimate training priorities, procurement choices, and readiness postures. Contestation may be explicit (open disagreement) or implicit (re-weighting of priorities and missions). These three dimensions are examined at both the political–strategic and operational–tactical levels, with particular attention to cross-level feedback effects.

Methodology and corpus

The methodological challenge is to distinguish between routine adjustment under pressure and a deeper reconfiguration of the narratives and practices through which the use of force is understood and justified. This article's discourse-based test of a critical juncture rests on the distinction between discursive novelty and discursive stabilization. A critical juncture claim gains plausibility when the post-2022 period shows not only new frames but also heightened contestation among alternatives and, crucially, evidence that particular interpretations are being institutionalized (e.g. appearing in successive strategy documents, justifying programming priorities, shaping doctrinal vocabulary, or becoming the default language through which problems and solutions are described). Conversely, continuity is evidenced by the persistence of pre-2022 linkages, by the absence of contestation in key domains, or by discursive novelty that is limited to isolated speeches. This explicit search for continuity helps avoid over-interpreting rhetorical change as cultural transformation. Thus, the design contrasts a pre-2022 baseline with a post-2022 period in order to identify continuity, novelty, and re-ranking of strategic meanings. The withdrawal from the Sahel in 2023–2024 is treated as a compounding disruption rather than a separate causal starting point: it is incorporated insofar as it amplifies stress on the force model and can, therefore, shape how post-2022 meanings are articulated and contested, but the central analytical focus remains the Ukraine shock and its consequences for European security.

Because critical junctures operate through interpretation and legitimation, and because strategic culture is conceptualized here as a constellation of narratives and practices, the methodological approach broadly belongs to discourse analysis. "Discourse analysis" is

an elastic term, encompassing a diversity of methods and normative commitments (Weinstein, 2024). For our purpose, the goal is to examine how authoritative actors define threats, attribute responsibility, demarcate what is feasible and legitimate, and stabilize particular understandings that then condition institutional and doctrinal trajectories. Therefore, I particularly rely on narrative analysis, although I also consider the actors' behaviors and other semiotic practices, which can be revelatory. In this article, the narrative analysis focuses on strategic narratives as a specific discursive mechanism through which actors seek to stabilize meaning in moments of uncertainty. Following Miskimmon et al. (2015), strategic narratives are treated as "a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors" (p. 341). To specify what kinds of narratives are examined, the analysis adopts the tripartite distinction developed in the strategic narratives literature between international system narratives, identity narratives, and policy narratives (Miskimmon et al., 2017). System narratives identify how the international order is structured, who the principal actors are, and what dynamics drive change; identity narratives define France's role, values, and responsibilities (including how "Europe," sovereignty, and autonomy are narrated as part of that identity); and policy narratives justify particular strategic choices by linking them to feasibility and desirability. To identify narrative shifts, the analysis tracked recurrent frames, metaphors, and historical analogies, attending, in particular, to how key linkages are made or broken (e.g. whether autonomy is narrated as distance from allies or as European capacity within the alliance). For institutional recalibration, it tracked how authority, coordination, and civil–military roles are justified. For doctrinal contestation, it tracked competing formulations of force employment and force-model priorities, explicit and implicit. To ensure validation, recurrent formulations, such as "war economy" or "high-intensity engagement," were tracked through close readings across texts and over time to establish whether they travel beyond isolated speeches.

Since the argument is organized around two levels, the corpus and the interpretive procedure are built to mirror that structure. Source selection follows three criteria. First, authority: texts are included where they carry institutional weight in fixing official meaning and include strategic reviews, programming law, presidential addresses to the armed forces, and chiefs-of-staff official statements. Second, level coverage: the political–strategic corpus comprises the *Revue nationale stratégique* (2022 and its 2025 update), the *Loi de programmation militaire* 2024–2030, President Macron's addresses to the armed forces (January 2023 and January 2024), and the Ile Longue deterrence speech (March 2026), together with hearings and reports of the defense committee of the National Assembly. In turn, the operational–tactical corpus comprises service doctrine and concept documents, doctrinal debate in professional journals (*Revue Militaire Générale* for the Army, Vortex for the Air and Space Force), and books and public statements by the three service chiefs and the Chief of the Defence Staff. Third, temporal contrast: each level includes pre-2022 and post-2022 texts so that continuity, novelty, and re-ranking can be identified against a baseline rather than asserted. In total, the corpus comprises approximately 80 documents spanning 2010–2026. The author's prior familiarity with the French defense community, derived from two decades of professional engagement in various capacities, informed source identification and contextual interpretation,

particularly of debates that are only partly documented in the public record (notably, evolutions of military doctrine); the analytical claims advanced here, however, rest on the public corpus specified above and are, in principle, replicable from it.

The political–strategic level of French strategic culture

This section examines the political–strategic level of French strategic culture, and how it sedimented in the 2010s around some largely (but not universally) accepted set of narratives and practices related to France's role in the world, the importance of nuclear deterrence, and civilian control of the military, which were challenged by the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the failure in the Sahel. It shows what the key aspects of this strategic culture entailed, how they were reinforced by bottom-up operational practices, and how they are now in a process of renegotiation.

Which grandeur?

The French strategic culture has long been defined by a complex interplay between symbolic narratives, institutional legacies, and doctrinal practices. This repertoire is best understood as a historically sedimented but continually re-legitimized set of identity narratives about what France is and what it owes to itself and to others. In that sense, *grandeur* is a contested and reusable symbolic resource that can be mobilized to justify divergent strategic preferences, especially under crisis conditions.

Two foundational identity storylines structure this repertoire. The first is a messianic tradition presenting France as a bearer of universal values and, therefore, as having a duty to promote them. This conviction regarding legitimacy through the promotion of rights has a long tradition in French political discourse and constitutes a strong marker of identity, encouraging the representation of French action as disinterested service to a universal common good (Hazareesingh, 2015). In tension with this messianic tradition is an equally established "ultra-realist" strand of French political thought. This tradition privileges *raison d'État*, balance of power, and the primacy of national interest. It tends to interpret international politics primarily in terms of power and state survival. Over time, the tension between these two narratives acquired a specific institutional inflection, not least because of the gradual concentration of foreign- and defense-policy authority within the executive branch (Rousselier, 2015). These two strands function as the political–strategic level's identity narratives: they form the baseline that is being recombined as the threat environment is renarrated.

The narrative of strategic independence, rooted in the Gaullist doctrine, has formed the bedrock of French strategic culture since the 1960s. France has consistently framed itself as a power distinct from the United States, asserting an autonomous role in global security affairs. This legacy has been reinforced by institutional mechanisms, including the centralization of nuclear decision-making in the presidency and a high degree of executive control over military operations. This posture of "reluctant atlanticist" (Schmitt, 2017) was convenient during the Cold War, but, after the fall of the USSR, the maintenance of the "autonomy" narrative started contradicting the pragmatic practice of gradual rapprochement with the United States. This shift was interpreted in different

ways by analysts: some argued that France traded a grand strategy of "*grandeur*" for one of "liberal engagement" (Balzacq, 2019), others observed a gradual narrative evolution toward inclusion within the transatlantic security system (Ostermann, 2018), and critics lamented the alleged loss of the French foreign policy identity (Zajec, 2018). In the public debate, the issue was framed as a competition between the so-called "Gaullo-Mitterandists" (partisans of a strongly affirmed independence) on the one hand, and the "Atlanticists" (sometimes labeled "neo-cons" by their opponents) on the other (Lequesne, 2016), which could be described as competing sub-cultures at the strategic level. This reductive framing ultimately had more to do with posturing and strategic positioning within the French political–mediatic system than analytical purchase (Galleri and Pincé, 2023; Gomart and Tonon, 2018; Vaïsse, 2017), but it nevertheless captured some underlying debates and unease within the French foreign policy circles (both analysts and practitioners) at the end of the 2010s (Charillon, 2019). These debates had to do with the proper relationship to establish with the United States, Israel, the Arab world but also with China and especially Russia.

Indeed, the debate about the proper relationship to establish with Russia was the center of gravity of numerous debates related to French foreign and security policy in the 2010s. Partisans of a rapprochement with Moscow consistently emphasized both the geopolitical and cultural proximity between the two countries, including the desire for a multipolar world order, a recognition of the centrality of the state as the organizer of society, and a common threat in the form of transnational jihadism. As such, the Russian strategic narratives overlapped with some French political myths (Schmitt, 2018) to create an ideational milieu that was relatively favorable to Russia. This milieu was, of course, further reinforced by Moscow's explicit support and relationship with some constituencies in the French political, economic, and mediatic circles (Vaissié, 2016). Moreover, in the wake of the 2015 attacks in Paris, counter-terrorism took center stage in the French military planning, and Russia was seen in military and police circles as a potential partner with which to exchange intelligence. As is discussed below, the French armed forces were also satisfied with their own understanding as expeditionary forces and were not pushing for a shift in strategic posture toward conventional deterrence against Russia. This explains why former President François Hollande declared at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit in 2016 that "Russia is neither an adversary nor a threat," or why President Emmanuel Macron started his presidency in 2017 with an explicit attempt to initiate a rapprochement with Moscow (De Glianasty, 2020). The French president's efforts were largely in vain, partly because he underestimated the poor structural prospects of the Franco–Russian relationship, as well as Russia's intentions. However, since the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Emmanuel Macron's Russian policy has undergone a profound change. The change was the result of a triple realization: that of the radical nature of Russian policy and the necessary adoption of a tougher stance to carry weight in the balance of power; that of having been under the illusion in his relationship with Vladimir Putin; and, above all, the realization that his Russian policy compromised his European project and France's credibility in Europe (Minic, 2024; Weber, 2025). Read through the framework, this 2010s milieu was a policy narrative (Russia as a partner rather than an adversary) with the matching operational posture of an expeditionary force focused on counter-terrorism cooperation.

This evolution was captured and institutionalized in key policy documents and announcements. On 25 February 2022, President Macron's message to Parliament denounced "Russia's war of aggression" and framed the conflict as a turning point for Europe, signaling early that Paris interpreted the invasion as a systemic rupture rather than a routine crisis. In the weeks prior to 24 February, France nonetheless pursued intense shuttle diplomacy between Moscow and Kyiv, consistent with a long-standing preference to pair deterrence with dialogue. That approach partly reflected a misreading of Russia's intentions and a belief that the costs of invading Ukraine would be prohibitive (Robin and Schmitt, 2026), but it also had a domestic political logic: with the far-right's *Rassemblement National* polling at roughly 30% and holding comparatively pro-Russian positions, Macron could credibly demonstrate that he had exhausted the diplomatic track before the outbreak of war. That pivot was already visible in the government's Toulon presentation of the *Revue nationale stratégique* (RNS) in November 2022, which reframed priorities around high-intensity warfare and alliance credibility. Two markers capture how Paris translated the shock into a more structural narrative. First, Macron's June 2022 call for a European *économie de guerre* signaled that the war required sustained industrial and budgetary mobilization rather than episodic assistance. Second, the updated RNS 2025 explicitly identifies the "permanence of a Russian threat at Europe's borders" as a central constant of the deteriorated strategic environment, codifying the invasion's enduring implications for French planning and posture (Secrétariat Général à la Défense et la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN), 2025). The rhetorical center of gravity then broadened from immediate crisis response to a longer-term European security argument. Macron's Sorbonne speech of 25 April 2024 called for a "more sovereign, powerful" Europe and linked support to Ukraine to the credibility of European deterrence and resilience, an articulation that complements NATO while foregrounding concerns about US reliability. When the Trump administration paused US military aid to Ukraine in early March 2025, French discourse hardened further around the need for European staying power and strategic continuity irrespective of Washington's oscillations.

Thus, there has been a rhetorical hardening of the French stance toward systemic threats, suggesting a move toward redefining responsibility not simply as norm enforcement but also as a contribution to collective deterrence. President Macron's framing of Russia's invasion as an attack on European security and sovereignty reflects a shift toward a more security-centric notion of responsibility that requires closer alignment with NATO, while still maintaining rhetorical autonomy. In that sense, while in the 2010s, "autonomy" was regularly portrayed as being realized *through* Russia, it is now framed as being established *against* Russia. Moreover, the forced withdrawal from the Sahel reopened debates about an appropriate military strategy, and the armed forces were now willing to redefine their own role and responsibilities. As an interviewee summarized, "it is convenient for the army that Russia invaded Ukraine, because they can avoid difficult questions about their own failure in the Sahel."[1] Although this is still debated in France, there is now a much larger elite and population consensus than before 2022 regarding the fact that Russia is a direct threat to European security, which indicates a

[1] Interview with an active duty general officer, Paris, March 2024.

redefinition of the meaning of autonomy in French strategic culture. This is reinforced by Donald J. Trump's reelection in 2024, and the first year of his second presidency, which has sent shockwaves in France, leading to a sort of convergence between those who were always skeptical of the relationship with the United States (and thus could claim that De Gaulle, more than 50 years after his passing, was finally vindicated), and those skeptical of the relationship with Russia, which is now clearly defined as an adversary in official discourses. If the 2022 full-scale invasion was a critical juncture for the French strategic culture, it is possible that Donald Trump's reelection will prove to be a further one; for now, however, it amplifies the post-2022 reconfiguration rather than completing it. Overall, it seems that the various subcultures are converging toward a relatively shared understanding of the current threat environment.

A renewed nuclear debate?

This subsection applies the article's discourse-analytic framework to French nuclear deterrence as a particularly demanding "hard test" of strategic–cultural change at the political–strategic level. President Macron's speech at Île Longue on 2 March 2026 is, therefore, a key text in the corpus: it is an explicit, high-authority codification of how the French executive now seeks to stabilize the meaning of deterrence in a post-2022 European security environment.

As argued above, the French nuclear doctrine has long functioned as a condensed expression of sovereignty, autonomy, and status (Heuser, 1998). This helps explain why the "European dimension" of the *force de frappe* has historically oscillated between symbolic gestures and strict reaffirmations of national command (Guisnel and Tertrais, 2016). The structure of the French nuclear policy community has reinforced this continuity: a comparatively tight epistemic configuration of senior military officers, technical–scientific actors, and state officials has historically reproduced a durable consensus around credibility, autonomy, and presidential control (Pelopidas, 2022; Poirier, 1992). In that sense, one would normally expect post-2022 change to appear first as discursive recalibration rather than doctrinal rupture.

Macron's 2 March 2026 speech confirms large continuity on several core doctrinal points, and does so in emphatic terms. He reasserts the centrality of deterrence as an "intangible" national pillar, reiterates exclusive presidential authority over the ultimate decision, and explicitly maintains the traditional French rejection of tactical nuclear use and graduated nuclear response. He also restates the strictly strategic character of French nuclear weapons and the continued separation between the conventional and nuclear domains, while reaffirming the logic of asymmetry rather than arsenal parity. These passages show that the foundational narrative of independence remains intact even in a context of heightened threat perception and institutional innovation.

At the same time, the speech marks several narrative shifts in how deterrence is linked to Europe and to the broader strategic environment. Macron explicitly frames the current period as one of geopolitical rupture and presents the evolution of French deterrence as a response to a combined threat environment (Russia, China, proliferation, and more connected nuclear and sub-nuclear risks), while invoking the *Revue nationale stratégique*'s diagnosis of Russia as a major danger for Europe. This is not just rhetorical

hardening: it reworks the relationship between sovereignty and geography by insisting that French deterrence strategy must now be thought "in the depth of the European continent" and by arguing that "independence cannot be solitude." In terms of strategic narratives, this is a significant re-linking of identity narratives (France as a sovereign nuclear power) and policy narratives (France as an organizer of European security) post-2022.

The most important novelty is the introduction of what Macron calls "*dissuasion avancée*" (forward deterrence), which moves beyond the earlier "European dimension" language while preserving command exclusivity. The speech states that there will be no sharing of the ultimate decision, no sharing of planning or implementation, and no sharing of the sovereign definition of French vital interests; it also rejects the idea of a rigid nuclear guarantee for partners. Yet, within those limits, Macron proposes a progressive framework that includes allied participation in deterrence exercises, signaling activities beyond French territory, possible conventional participation of allied forces in nuclear-related activities, and in some circumstances, the deployment of elements of French strategic forces on allied territory. This is a major case of institutional recalibration: the doctrine's sovereign core is reaffirmed, but the surrounding practices of consultation, signaling, and partnership are significantly expanded.

The speech also gives this recalibration a concrete European architecture. Macron presents an already-advanced process of bilateral and multilateral coordination: strengthened nuclear cooperation with the United Kingdom, the attendance of senior British officials at a French strategic air-force exercise, and the opening of structured dialogue with Germany and a wider group of partners (including Poland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, and Denmark).

A second major shift concerns the relationship between nuclear deterrence and conventional capabilities, which Macron now formulates through the language of "*épaulement*" (strategic backing). He argues that, in a context of intensified conflict below the nuclear threshold, credible deterrence requires stronger conventional capacities in early warning, extended air and missile defense, and long-range strike. The speech links this directly to European capability development: French nuclear sovereignty is no longer presented only as a standalone "ultimate guarantee" but as the apex of a broader Europeanized architecture of conventional support under escalation pressure. That is a genuine reconfiguration of the policy narrative, even if the core doctrine remains formally continuous (Fayet et al., 2024).

The speech also goes further than previous formulations on force posture and arsenal signaling. Macron explicitly announces an increase in the number of French nuclear warheads and states that France will no longer communicate the size of its arsenal. At the same time, he presents this increase as consistent with France's traditional rejection of an arms race and with an asymmetrical doctrine aimed at preserving assured destruction rather than matching adversaries weapon for weapon.

Overall, the speech indicates a significant strategic–cultural evolution: continuity in the doctrinal core (exclusive presidential control, no delegated vital interests, no tactical nuclear return, no graduated response) is combined with a significant institutional and narrative expansion of the European role of French deterrence through "*dissuasion avancée*," structured partnerships, and the explicit coupling of deterrence to European conventional "*épaulement*." This is consistent with 2022 functioning as a critical juncture

even in the nuclear domain, a domain long resistant to doctrinal updates, provided the juncture is understood as institutional and narrative reconfiguration around an unchanged doctrinal core rather than doctrinal rupture.

Changing norms of civil–military relations?

This subsection treats civil–military relations as a site where narrative and institutional meanings of "legitimate authority" over force are produced and contested and, therefore, as a relevant indicator of institutional recalibration at the political–strategic level. Historically structured by the centralization of decision-making in the executive branch and the professionalization of the armed forces, the French model has long favored a system of civilian supremacy through presidential primacy, rather than parliamentary control or bureaucratic pluralism. However, the past two decades have witnessed a reconfiguration of the civil–military nexus, driven by operational demands, internal restructuring, and shifting societal expectations (Guibert, 2018). Civil–military relations in France have become sites of symbolic politics, cultural authority, and normative contestation, making them potentially important to the redefinition of strategic culture and raising the question of whether 2022 accelerates, redirects, or merely overlays longer-running trends.

At the core of France's postwar strategic governance lies a dual institutional logic: presidential command over strategic decisions, especially nuclear ones, and a technocratic ministry structure designed to implement political will while preserving military professionalism. The 1958 Constitution codified the President as the Head of the Armed Forces, and the establishment of the *Conseil de Défense et de Sécurité Nationale* ensured that strategic deliberations remained tightly circumscribed within the executive. The resulting model was one of insulated expertise and elite command, a strategic culture that presumed a clear boundary between military execution and civilian intent (Pannier and Schmitt, 2020). However, the demands of permanent expeditionary operations since the 1990s began to erode this neat separation. With interventions in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East, French civil–military relations evolved toward greater interdependence, as operational tempo and strategic ambiguity necessitated more fluid coordination. This was institutionalized through the establishment of the *État-Major des Armées* (EMA), which acts as a joint staff under the authority of the *Chef d'État-Major des Armées* (CEMA), formally subordinate to the civilian minister but functionally influential in shaping operational doctrine and threat assessments. Over time, the EMA accrued greater planning and strategic responsibilities, often filling the gap left by a relatively weak civilian defense expertise outside the Élysée and the Ministry (Daho, 2019).

Yet, while the military's expertise is increasingly necessary for credible planning, its authority remains subordinated to an executive-centric model that resists pluralism. The National Assembly plays a limited role in defense oversight, and while think tanks and strategic institutes have grown in prominence, they often depend on state funding and elite networks (Rahbek-Clemmensen and Schmitt, 2017). Yet, the elevation of the military to a position of national moral authority carries the danger of political instrumentalization. In an increasingly polarized political environment, appeals to military identity and discipline can become shorthand for broader critiques of democratic pluralism and

civil liberties (Rouban, 2022). As such, the changing civil–military relationship must be understood not only institutionally but ideologically, as part of a broader cultural shift in how the state envisions authority, legitimacy, and national purpose.

This dynamic reached a new phase with the post-2015 securitization of public spaces. The terrorist attacks in Paris inaugurated a prolonged period of domestic military deployment under *Opération Sentinelle*, which brought uniformed soldiers into daily contact with the public. This shift from external deployment to homeland presence blurred the traditional distinction between the military and civilian spheres. More importantly, it contributed to the symbolic reconstitution of the military as a domestic actor, not just as a foreign policy instrument. The military became visible, valorised, and increasingly woven into national narratives of protection and resilience (Tenenbaum, 2016). Public trust in the Armed Forces surged, often outpacing confidence in other state institutions (Chéron, 2018). This newfound visibility was both an effect and a cause of changing civil–military dynamics; the military was gradually seen as important to the security and cohesion of French society. This transformation had implications for the political discourse surrounding the Armed Forces. Conservative and far-right figures increasingly invoked the military as a repository of national virtues (discipline, unity, and sacrifice), which they claimed were lacking in civilian politics (Merchet, 2013). High-profile interventions by retired generals, including a 2021 open-letter warning of societal collapse, illustrate the growing willingness of segments of the military community to enter public debate. While active-duty officers remain institutionally constrained from political activity, the symbolic authority of the military is gradually becoming a contested political resource (Chéron, 2026).

The state itself has contributed to this discursive shift. Programs like the *Service National Universel* (SNU), launched under Macron, aimed to instill civic values in youth through quasi-military experiences. While the SNU was formally thought of as a civic service, its reliance on military symbolism and structure signaled a reinvestment in the military as a moral educator, not just a security provider. This marked a return to older republican traditions, where national service was seen as a mechanism for civic integration (Cochet, 2013). However, in the contemporary context of professionalized armed forces, the SNU also reflected a compensatory logic: since the military no longer represents a broad cross-section of society, its values must be symbolically reinserted through pedagogical initiatives. Thus, the military was not only acting but being acted upon: used by certain political elites and advocates to craft narratives of unity and national renewal. Yet, in November 2025, President Macron announced that the SNU would be discontinued and replaced by a *Service Militaire Volontaire* (SMV; Voluntary Military Service), which would aim at recruiting up to 50,000 volunteers by 2030. Unlike the SNU, the SMV has a clear military purpose and should be interpreted as part of the broader European trends toward reintroducing some forms of conscription in the face of the Russian threat: in a fiscally constrained environment, the French government has decided to prioritize the strengthening of the French military instead of continuing with the social experiment of militarily-engineered cohesion.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine further intensified the evolving dynamics of French civil–military relations, but in a way that is analytically more ambiguous than in the discourses about strategic autonomy and nuclear deterrence: it is not self-evident that

2022 is the *originating* shock for this specific domain. In fact, the critical juncture could, instead, be the 2015 terror attacks, while 2022 may operate more as an accelerator and a reframing device than as the original rupture. Indeed, it might be too early to really assess the impact of the full-scale invasion of 2022 on French civil–military relations, but some signs can be discerned. Bénédicte Chéron, a leading historian of armed forces–society relations in France, has argued that the evolving strategic landscape has disrupted a long-standing French narrative of immunity from war (Chéron, 2025). For decades, French political and military elites cultivated a public discourse that framed military operations as "crises" rather than wars, thereby shielding citizens from the psychological and political consequences of armed conflict. This narrative created a distortion: although France has conducted nearly continuous military interventions since the late 1970s, the public has not been encouraged to rationally engage with the prospect that such conflicts might directly concern them. Chéron attributes this denial to enduring historical layers: memories of the World Wars, the Cold War's predictable rhythm of détente and tension, and an overreliance on deterrence and the American alliance, which bred complacency. The erosion of this narrative, especially amid the degradation of US credibility, has unsettled the French public's expectations of security and forced a reevaluation of the national defense discourse.

Yet, these changes are not without contestation. When the chief of the general staff, General Mandon, addressed the congress of mayors and declared that France should be ready to "lose its children" in a potential major war (in line with the strategic assessment of the National Security Review), it was portrayed by the opposition as war-mongering (Schofield, 2025). Similarly, the respected historian of World War 1, Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, published in January 2026 a book titled "our denial of war," in which he argued that European societies have willingly forgotten about the possibility of large-scale destruction on their territories (Audoin-Rouzeau, 2026). He presented his book at the University Lyon III in February 2026, only for the talk to be interrupted by far-left militants who denounced his alleged warmongerism (Anon, 2026).

Overall, civil–military relations provide a more cautious test of "critical juncture" than domains where post-2022 narrative shifts are already codified in authoritative strategic texts. More critically, these narrative and doctrinal shifts have not emerged in a vacuum: they interact with military preferences, operational cultures, and internal professional dynamics that are themselves subject to redefinition. To fully understand whether and how French strategic culture is indeed transforming, it is essential to turn to the operational–tactical level, where military doctrine, force structure, and professional identity respond to political signals but also feed back into the strategic debate from below.

The operational–tactical level of French strategic culture

The operational–tactical level of French strategic culture provides a crucial vantage point for observing how the narratives and institutional frameworks crafted at the political–strategic level are implemented, adapted, or resisted in practice. Applying the same three-dimensional framework used above, this section examines narrative shifts in how the services define professional excellence, preparedness, and the "ideal" use of force;

institutional recalibration in force posture, training priorities, and inter-service coordination; and doctrinal contestation over the future force model. Yet, this translation is never automatic. It is shaped by organizational culture, historical precedent, inter-service rivalries, and the professional socialization of officers (Mansoor and Murray, 2019). The full-scale invasion of Ukraine has created external pressures that challenge these inherited assumptions, but it has also sparked internal debates over the future of the French force model.

One of the most persistent features of the French military landscape is the segmentation of officer corps and unit identities across the three major services (Cochet, 2013). As multiple studies of French military sociology have demonstrated, officers in the Army, Navy, and Air Force have developed distinct cultures shaped by recruitment channels, educational institutions, and patterns of deployment (Ménard, 2019). For instance, the Air Force displays a strong internal stratification between navigators, engineers, and support personnel (Pajon and Trotoux, 2021).

Within the Army, perhaps the most studied and politically salient subculture is that of the expeditionary elite units, notably, the Troupes de Marine, Foreign Legion, and airborne regiments, the so-called "colo" troops (short for "colonial," since these units are heir to the army troops stationed in French colonies in Africa since colonization in the 19th century). These units have historically been associated with France's overseas interventions and are marked by a post-colonial operational tradition (Bodart, 2025). Their self-perception is that of adaptive, combat-tested professionals, comfortable with ambiguity and violence, and skeptical of bureaucratic constraint. These units maintain strong intra-regimental identities, which are perpetuated through selective recruitment, oral traditions, and training cycles, emphasizing endurance, initiative, and mission fluidity. Their members frequently cycle through theaters such as Mali, Chad, or the Central African Republic, contributing to an ethos of permanent deployment readiness. This dominance also shapes senior command:

> Of the six chiefs of general staff coming from the army since 1991, four had a career in the foreign legion or the Troupes de Marine (Generals Kelche, Bentégeat, Lecointre, and Burkhard). To some degree, the post-Cold War trajectory of the French Army can be read as a convergence of the metropolitan army toward the expeditionary warfare model favoured by the "colo." (Schmitt and Tenenbaum, 2023: 355)

This subculture has doctrinal implications. It favors what Ruffa (2018) identifies as a pragmatic heuristic of force employment: rapid intervention, minimum footprint, high autonomy for field commanders, and an emphasis on kinetic action to assert presence and disrupt adversaries. This model was manifest in Operation Serval (launched in 2013), where French forces rapidly seized control of key towns in Mali through decisive, highly mobile action. The success of such missions reinforces an internal narrative of French military exceptionalism, wherein elite units view themselves as capable of achieving political objectives through tactical brilliance (Shurkin, 2014). However, this model exists in tension with other cultures within the French military, particularly those involved in multinational peacekeeping or EU/UN missions. Units deployed under the aegis of EUFOR, MINUSMA, or UNIFIL often operate under restrictive rules of

engagement and complex chains of command. Their officers must reconcile national directives with multinational doctrines, adapt to unfamiliar operating cultures, and manage political sensitivities. These deployments engender a cosmopolitan military culture that values liaison skills, cultural awareness, and political acuity. This contrasts sharply with the expeditionary ethos, generating friction in doctrine development, evaluation criteria, and even career advancement (Goya, 2022).

The organizational response to Ukraine further illuminated the divergent heuristics within the military. While elite Army units emphasize mobility and adaptability, the conflict has underscored the need for mass, logistics, and combined-arms readiness, domains long underprioritized. A first post-2022 marker is the rapid operational "pivot" from Africa to Europe. France moved from a pre-war posture still heavily structured around *Barkhane* to assuming greater responsibility for NATO deterrence after the invasion. Paris expanded from limited, rotational contributions on NATO's eastern flank to more durable and structured presences, including the decision to make the Estonia detachment permanent and its assumption of the framework-nation role for the multinational battlegroup in Romania (Operation *Aigle*), with rapid deployment and subsequent scaling. These choices operationalize a reframing of Europe as the primary theater and of Russia as the pacing threat (Tenenbaum and Zima, 2024).

A second translation is visible in air and maritime postures, which reveal both adaptation to high-intensity assumptions and the narrowing gap between autonomy rhetoric and coalition warfighting requirements. Operational changes include intensified air policing and early deployments of Rafales jet fighters on the day of the invasion, or the positioning of a SAMP/T MAMBA air defense system in Romania. On the maritime side, the placement of the Charles de Gaulle carrier under NATO operational control in 2024 is particularly telling: it represents a shift in what is considered normal and legitimate operational behavior for a force historically attached to national freedom of action. The move drew criticism from both far-left and far-right voices as a "loss of sovereign power," while French officials framed it as normal alliance practice: an unusually clear public contest over what "sovereignty" should mean in naval command culture after Ukraine (Gray, 2024).

Moreover, what shifts after February 2022 is not only what the services prepare for but also the professional vocabularies through which they define legitimacy and excellence. The contrast is with the prior doctrinal formula: where the expeditionary heuristic emphasized rapid intervention, minimal footprint, and high autonomy for field commanders, the emerging vocabulary is about mass, sustainment, combined-arms coordination, and endurance under fire: a measurable shift in which terms are used to define competence. For the French Army, the war functions as a powerful "re-labelling" device: an expeditionary self-image built around tactical virtuosity and rapid action becomes increasingly supplemented by a language of "high-intensity engagement" (Néron-Bancel, 2025). That discursive repositioning is visible in how major exercises are publicly framed: the joint ORION exercise was reportedly made harder after Russia's invasion to approximate high-intensity conditions, signaling an institutional willingness to elevate different skills (endurance, uncertainty management, large-scale coordination) into markers of competence (Pietralunga, 2023). The same reframing appears in parliamentary assessments that explicitly describe a "before/after ORION" and present the return of large exercises on

national territory as symbolic of the return of high-intensity warfare for the French model of defense (Bordat and Taverne, 2024). A comparable cultural movement is visible in the French Air and Space Force, where post-2022 change is repeatedly narrated as a break with long-set "habits" rather than a mere technical update. The Air Force's embrace of dispersed, reactive basing under the MORANE concept (France's adaptation of NATO's Agile Combat Employment) is presented by the Ministry's own communication as something that "transforms habits that have been solidified over decades" (Anon, 2024), a strong cultural claim about identity, routines, and what counts as professional excellence. For the French Navy, post-2022 cultural change also relates to the gradual contestation of the sea. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of publications from naval officers specifically looking at warfare at sea (instead of broader strategic functions of navies, such as policing and diplomacy). An example is the book "Naval Tactics" published by Navy captains Lavernhe and Corman (2023), which explicitly identifies the war in Ukraine as a turning point for the international order. A similar argument is developed in a recently published book by the Chief of the French Navy, Admiral Vaujour (2026), a bird's-eye view of contemporary maritime threats which, according to him, require a profound transformation of the French navy's culture in order to operate in a permanently contested environment.

Admiral Vaujour is not the only senior officer writing about the need for cultural change. The chief of the army, General Schill, also published a book in 2025, in which he advocated for a cultural change in the army by adopting the principle of "mission command," in order to adjust to the post-Ukraine strategic environment (Schill, 2025). The case of the army is particularly interesting in this attempt to initiate cultural change. While both the chief of the army (General Schill) and the Joint Chief of Staff between July 2021 and August 2025 (General Burkhard) come from the elite light infantry troops that are historically dominant in the French army, they have both been vocally supporting a reorientation toward high-intensity conventional warfare. It might be argued that by undermining the expectations that they would keep supporting the light French expeditionary model due to their professional background, they grant further legitimacy to the ongoing transformation projects (Pebay, 2025). Finally, while the Chief of the Air Force has not laid out a vision for cultural change similar to his colleagues, he nevertheless regularly highlights the contested operational environment (in particular, the threat of advanced air defense systems) as requiring a new operational approach. There thus seems to be an agreement among the highest authorities of the French armed forces that some cultural changes are required. However, material and budgetary constraints also matter.

France's assistance to Ukraine and its eastern-flank posture demonstrate real adaptation, yet there are persistent limits of a high-tech, low-mass model: even where commitments expand, the quantitative scale remains constrained, and choices are carefully calibrated. The Russian invasion of 2022 generated stronger incentives for doctrinal contestation and readiness reorientation, but the material and organizational inheritance of the "intervention era" continues to shape what can be implemented and, thus, continues to constrain, and co-produce, the options available at the political–strategic level (Droff et al., 2025). The force model that emerged from decades of low-intensity expeditionary interventions (and heavily influenced by the operational culture of elite light infantry) has reached the limits of its relevance. France today maintains a "bonsai army:" a highly

capable but undersized force, stretched thin across multiple theaters and under-optimized for sustained high-intensity warfare (Schmitt, 2020). This moment exposes deeper tensions within the operational–tactical level of strategic culture. The doctrines and heuristics inherited from past interventions continue to shape procurement, promotion, and training. However, the demands of great-power competition require a recalibration not only of capabilities but of mindsets. As mentioned, the growing awareness among senior commanders of this mismatch has produced a degree of strategic introspection. But the French military must now choose between three potential force structure models: (1) maintaining the current model, flexible but brittle, with a focus on out-of-area interventions; (2) undertaking a full-scale doctrinal and organizational shift that reflects the return of conventional warfare in Europe (which necessitates a rebalancing of the Army and the Air Force but a reduced commitment for the Navy); or (3) trying to contribute to France's Indo–Pacific strategy, which would imply a Navy/Air Force focus. In the absence of clear strategic guidance from the political level, the services all vie for their preferred model according to their own interests and military subcultures of choice (Merchet, 2024). These options are not neutral technical choices but rival service claims on a finite budget: the Army, championing mass and territorial defense, has the strongest stake in the second; the Navy, whose case is made through sea control and an Indo–Pacific horizon, resists the reduced commitment that option implies for it and favors the third; and the Air and Space Force, central to both high-intensity continental defense and Indo–Pacific reach, stands to gain under either. The apparent agreement that "cultural change is required," therefore, conceals an unresolved contest over whose change prevails. The result of their internal competition and competitive lobbying may end up shaping the preferences of the politicians themselves.

This suggests that the operational–tactical layer of French strategic culture is entering a phase of contestation. Long-dominant expeditionary narratives are being challenged by emerging visions of territorial defense, alliance integration, and force regeneration. If fully realized, these changes would constitute more than an update in doctrine: they would mark a substantive evolution in how the French military understands its role, its identity, and its ideal modes of warfighting. In this sense, the effects of the 2022 Russian invasion may extend deeper than immediate adjustments: they could catalyze a generational transformation in the strategic culture of France's armed forces. Thus, at the operational–tactical level, 2022 looks like a critical juncture: it re-ranks what counts as "preparedness" and forces a renegotiation of service identities and doctrines around high-intensity, coalition warfighting. But it is not yet consolidated into a new force-model equilibrium, because mass/budget constraints and inter-service competition still limit institutionalization.

Conclusion

This article asked whether Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine constitutes a critical juncture for French strategic culture. The answer is yes, but with uneven effects. The invasion created the conditions identified in the article's framework: heightened uncertainty; wider strategic debate; and visible processes of narrative re-linking, institutional recalibration, and doctrinal contestation. At the same time, these processes have not yet produced a single, settled new equilibrium, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of findings across levels and dimensions of strategic-cultural change.

Domain/level	Narrative shifts	Institutional recalibration	Doctrinal contestation
Political–strategic: autonomy & threat	**Strong**. Russia reframed from a potential partner to a structural adversary; autonomy re-linked to European resilience and collective deterrence.	**Moderate**. European security framed as requiring sustained industrial mobilization; updated strategy documents codify new threat assessment.	**Moderate**. Convergence among previously competing subcultures on threat definition, but residual tension over the degree of alignment with NATO vs preserved autonomy.
Political–strategic: nuclear deterrence	**Strong**. "European dimension" language replaced by forward deterrence; sovereignty re-narrated as compatible with structured European partnership.	**Strong**. Bilateral and multilateral consultation mechanisms announced; conventional *épaulement* tied to European capability programs.	**Low**. Core doctrine (exclusive presidential control, no tactical use, and no graduated response) remains unchallenged.
Political–strategic: civil–military relations	**Moderate**. Narrative of "immunity from war" eroding; armed forces increasingly narrated as moral-civic actors.	**Moderate–low**. SNU replaced by the SMV, signaling prioritization of military purpose over social cohesion; but 2015, not 2022, appears as originating shock.	**Low**. No visible contestation over the executive-centric model of civilian control.
Operational–tactical	**Strong**. Professional vocabularies shifting from expeditionary virtuosity to "high-intensity engagement."	**Moderate**. Pivot from the Sahel to the NATO eastern flank; expanded Baltic/Romania presence.	**Strong**. Inter-service competition over future force model remains unresolved; budget constraints limit institutionalization.

This unevenness is not incidental. It follows from the differential adjustment costs set out in the framework: narrative and institutional meanings can be updated at comparatively low cost, whereas doctrinal and force-model change is gated by procurement cycles, budget envelopes, the institutional legacy of the intervention era, and inter-service bargaining. That is why the political–strategic level, and especially its narrative dimension, registers the strongest critical-juncture dynamics, while the operational–tactical level shows strong contestation but only limited institutionalization. Therefore, 2022 reads less as a consolidated rupture than as the opening of an uneven, path-dependent process of adaptation whose outcome is not yet settled.

The strongest evidence for a critical-juncture dynamic appears at the political–strategic level. Core narratives about Russia, Europe, and autonomy have been reconfigured. In the 2010s, French strategic autonomy could still be narrated in ways compatible with dialogue with Moscow. After 2022, Russia is increasingly framed as a structural adversary, and autonomy is more clearly linked to European resilience and collective deterrence. This shift is reflected in authoritative strategic texts, speeches, and policy debates, which indicates early stabilization rather than a temporary change in tone.

The nuclear domain reinforces this conclusion. The doctrinal core remains largely intact (exclusive presidential control, sovereign command, and continuity in the fundamentals of deterrence). But the surrounding narrative and institutional framing have changed significantly. The March 2026 presidential discourse moves beyond a vague "European dimension" toward a more explicit framework of consultation, signaling, and conventional support tied to European security while preserving national control. This combination of doctrinal continuity and institutional-narrative innovation is consistent with a critical juncture understood as reconfiguration rather than rupture. By contrast, civil–military relations are a more ambiguous case. Important shifts in visibility, symbolic authority, and the public role of the armed forces are evident, but many of these dynamics predate 2022 and appear more directly linked to the post-2015 securitization of public space. Here, 2022 operates more as an accelerator than as the original break, and a new institutional settlement has not yet emerged. At the operational–tactical level, 2022 does look like a critical juncture in one key sense: it has re-ranked what counts as preparedness and intensified doctrinal contestation across services. Yet, this remains a juncture without closure. The expeditionary legacy, force-size constraints, and inter-service competition continue to limit full institutionalization of a new force model.

Overall, 2022 should be understood as opening the space for a major shift in French strategic culture: some of its changes are already visible, but the renegotiation process is far from settled, which is probably to be expected in such a short timeframe.

Beyond the French case, the analysis has an implication for how strategic culture is studied. Because the two levels adapt at different rates and through different mechanisms, treating strategic culture as a single variable mis-describes change: read only through elite discourse, France's strategic culture looks transformed; read only through doctrine and force structure, it looks static. It is neither. Distinguishing a political–strategic register from an operational–tactical one makes partial and uneven change observable, and reconnects the study of ideas with the study of practices. The framework's expectation that narrative and institutional recalibration outrun doctrinal and force-model change after a shock should also travel to other states, which opens the possibility of

comparative analysis of the factors explaining the lags between the two levels. As such, differentiating between different levels of strategic culture opens up the potentiality of a renewed research agenda.

ORCID iD

Olivier Schmitt https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1366-6621

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Anon (2024) « Volfa » 2024: des équipages chasse éprouvent le concept MORANE en mission. *Armée de l'air et de l'espace*. Available at: https://www.defense.gouv.fr/air/actualites/volfa-2024-equipages-chasse-eprouvent-concept-morane-mission? (accessed 20 February 2026).

Anon (2026) Des militants d'extrême-gauche empêchent une conférence à l'université Lyon 3. *Le Progrès*, 16 February. Available at: https://www.leprogres.fr/education/2026/02/16/des-militants-d-extreme-gauche-empechent-une-conference-a-l-universite-lyon-3

Audoin-Rouzeau S (2026) *Notre Déni de Guerre*. Gallimard.

Balzacq T (2019) France. In: Balzacq T, Dombrowski P and Reich S (eds) *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework and Cases*. Oxford University Press, pp.99–122.

Bloomfield A (2012) Time to move on: Reconceptualizing the strategic culture debate. *Contemporary Security Policy* 33(3): 437–461.

Bodart B (ed.) (2025) *Histoire des Troupes de Marine*. Perrin.

Bordat B and Taverne M (2024) Rapport d'information déposé en application de l'article 145 du règlement, par la commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, en conclusion des travaux d'une mission d'information sur l'après Orion: faire face aux crises de demain, n. 2727, 5 June. Available at: https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/17/rapports/cion_def/l17b2617_rapport-information

Charillon F (2019) Débat sur un Néo-Conservatisme à la Française. *Annuaire français de relations internationales* 2019: 341–352.

Chéron B (2018) *Le soldat méconnu*. Armand Colin.

Chéron B (2025) Pendant des décennies, les Français ne se sont pas sentis directement concernés par les rapports de force internationaux. *Le Monde*, 19 March. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2025/03/19/benedicte-cheron-historienne-pendant-des-decennies-les-francais-ne-se-sont-pas-sentis-directement-concernes-par-les-rapports-de-force-internationaux_6583467_3232.html

Chéron B (2026) *Mobiliser. Rétablir le Service Militaire: le Grand Malentendu*. Éditions du Rocher.

Cochet F (2013) *Être Soldat en France, de la Révolution à Nos Jours*. Armand Colin.

Collier D and Munck GL (eds) (2022) *Critical Junctures and Historical Legacies: Insights and Methods for Comparative Social Science*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Daho G (2019) A revenge of the generals. The rebalancing of the civil-military relations in France. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 13: 304–322.
De Glianasty J (2020) La Politique Russe du Président Macron. *La Revue Internationale et Stratégique* 117: 31–39.
Donnithorne JW (2018) *Four Guardians: A Principled Agent View of American Civil-Military Relations*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
Droff J, Malizard J and Schmitt O (2025) When military interventions decrease military power. Evidence from the French case. *Defence and Peace Economics* 36(1): 102–125.
Fayet H, Futter A and Kühn U (2024) Forum: Towards a European nuclear deterrent. *Survival* 66(5): 67–98.
Galleri F and Pincé Y (2023) Défense Européenne: le Tabou Gaulliste. *20 & 21: Revue d'histoire* 158(2): 133–147.
Gomart T and Tonon C (2018) Le futur d'une ellipse: Le vain débat français de politique étrangère. *Hérodote* 170(3): 43–55.
Götz E and Staun J (2022) Why Russia attacked Ukraine: Strategic culture and radicalized narratives. *Contemporary Security Policy* 43(3): 482–497.
Goya M (2022) *Le temps des guépards. La guerre mondiale de la France de 1961 à nos jours*. Perrin.
Gray A (2024) With Russia in mind, French carrier joins drills under NATO command. *Reuters*, 26 April. Available at: https://www.google.com/search?q=With+Russia+in+mind%2C+French+carrier+joins+drills+under+NATO+command.+Reuters%2C+26+April&oq=With+Russia+in+mind%2C+French+carrier+joins+drills+under+NATO+command.+Reuters%2C+26+April&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIHCAEQIRiPAtIBBzI1M2owajSoAgCwAgE&sourceid=chrome&source=chrome.ob&ie=UTF-8
Guibert N (2018) *Qui c'est le Chef ? La Vraie Crise entre le Pouvoir et l'Armée*. Robert Laffont.
Guisnel J and Tertrais B (2016) *Le Président et la Bombe: Jupiter à l'Elysée*. Odile Jacob.
Hazareesingh S (2015) *How the French Think: An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People*. Basic Books.
Heuser B (1998) *Nuclear Mentalities? Strategies and Beliefs in Britain, France and the FRG*. Palgrave Macmillan.
Hofmann S and Martill B (2021) The party scene: New directions for political party research in foreign policy analysis. *International Affairs* 97(2): 305–322.
Lavernhe T and Corman F-O (2023) *Vaincre en mer au XXIe siècle*. Éditions des équateurs.
Lequesne C (2016) *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay*. CNRS Editions.
Libel T (2016) Explaining the security paradigm shift: Strategic culture, epistemic communities, and Israel's changing national security policy. *Defence Studies* 16(2): 137–156.
Libel T (2020) Rethinking strategic culture: A computational (social science) discursive-institutionalist approach. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43(5): 686–709.
Linn BM (2008 [2007]) *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*. Harvard University Press.
Lock E (2018) Strategic culture theory: What, why, and how. In: Hannah E (ed.) *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Politics*. Oxford University Press, online edn.
Mansoor PR and Murray W (eds) (2019) *The Culture of Military Organizations*. Cambridge University Press.
Ménard A (2019) *Armées françaises : trois milieux, trois cultures*. Nuvis.
Merchet J-D (2013) Cette extrême-droite qui fantasme sur un coup d'Etat militaire. *L'Opinion*, 5 June. Available at: https://www.lopinion.fr/secret-defense/cette-extreme-droite-qui-fantasme-sur-un-coup-detat-militaire
Merchet J-D (2024) *Sommes-nous Prêts pour la Guerre ?* Robert Laffont.

Minic D (2024) La politique russe d'Emmanuel Macron: étapes et racines d'une nouvelle approche, 2017-2024. Notes De L'ifri, n. *133*. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/fr/notes/la-politique-russe-demmanuel-macron-etapes-et-racines-dune-nouvelle-approche-2017-2024

Miskimmon A, O'Loughlin B and Roselle L (2015) Strategic narratives: A response. *Critical Studies on Security* 3(3): 341–344.

Miskimmon A, O'Loughlin B and Roselle L (eds) (2017) *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives in International Relations*. University of Michigan Press.

Néron-Bancel P (2025) Transformation de l'armée de terre. Que signifie la réorganisation vers une armée de terre de combat? *Éditoriaux de l'Ifri*, 20 February. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/fr/editoriaux/transformation-de-larmee-de-terre-que-signifie-la-reorganisation-vers-une-armee-de-terre

Ostermann F (2018) *Security, Defense Discourse and Identity in NATO and Europe: How France Changed Foreign Policy*. Routledge.

Pajon C and Trotoux C (2021) Officiers dans l'Armée de l'Air: Segmentation d'une Profession et Espace Interarmées. In: Jankowski B, Muxel A and Thura M (eds) *La sociologie militaire: Héritages et nouvelles perspectives*. Peter Lang, pp.149–170.

Pannier A and Schmitt O (2020) *French Defence Policy since the End of the Cold War*. Routledge.

Pebay L (2025) The French Army transitions to "high intensity" warfare: Strengths, drawbacks, and challenges of French ambitions. *European Review of International Studies* 11(3): 58–85.

Pelopidas B (2022) *Repenser les Choix Nucléaires*. Presses de Sciences Po.

Pietralunga C (2023) « Orion », un exercice militaire d'une ampleur inédite dans le sud de la France pour se préparer à la guerre de haute intensité. *Le Monde*, 24 February. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2023/02/24/orion-un-exercice-pour-se-preparer-a-la-guerre-de-haute-intensite_6163096_3210.html

Poirier L (1992) *Des Stratégies Nucléaires*. Complexe.

Rahbek-Clemmensen J and Schmitt O (2017) The impact of institutions on foreign policy think tanks in France and Denmark. *The International Spectator* 52(1): 100–115.

Robin M and Schmitt O (2026) Perceptions explaining the divergent assessments of the Ukraine War among western governments. In: Paquin S and Lanozska A (eds) *International Politics and the Russo-Ukrainian War: Concepts in Conflict*. Routledge, pp.66–83.

Rouban L (2022) *La Vraie Victoire du RN*. Presses de Sciences Po.

Rousselier N (2015) *La force de gouverner. Le pouvoir exécutif en France, XIXe- XXIe siècles*. Gallimard.

Ruffa C (2018) *Military Cultures in Peace and Stability Operations: Afghanistan and Lebanon*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Schill P (2025) *Le Sens du Commandement*. Cerf.

Schmitt O (2012) Strategic users of culture: German decisions for military action. *Contemporary Security Policy* 33(1): 59–81.

Schmitt O (2017) French Military Adaptation in the Afghan War: Looking Inward or Outward?. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 40(4): 577–599.

Schmitt O (2018) When are strategic narratives effective? The shaping of political discourse through the interaction between political myths and strategic narratives. *Contemporary Security Policy* 39(4): 487–511.

Schmitt O (2020) France between autonomy and allies. In Schmitt GJ (ed.) *A Hard Look at Hard Power: Assessing the Defense Capabilities of Key US Allies and Security Partners*. 2nd ed. US Army War College Press, pp.55–84.

Schmitt O and Tenenbaum E (2023) Caught between a rock and a hard place: The French Army, expeditionary warfare, and the return of strategic competition. In: Weissmann M and Nilsson

N (eds) *Advanced Land Warfare: Tactics and Operations*. Oxford University Press, pp.353–371.
Schofield H (2025) Outcry at army chief's warning France must prepare to "lose children" in war. *BBC*, 21 November. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ce91zvnrz0lo
Secrétariat Général à la Défense et la Sécurité Nationale (SGDSN) (2025) *Revue National Stratégique*. SGDSN.
Shurkin M (2014) *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*. Rand Corporation.
Sjøgren S (2024) What we disagree about when we disagree about doctrine. *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47(4): 474–497.
Tenenbaum E (2016) La Sentinelle Égarée ? L'Armée de Terre face au Terrorisme, Focus Stratégique. *IFRI, no. 68*. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/fr/etudes/la-sentinelle-egaree-larmee-de-terre-face-au-terrorisme
Tenenbaum E and Zima A (2024) Return to the East: The Russian threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank. *IFRI Studies*, April. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/return-east-russian-threat-and-french-pivot-europes-eastern-flank
Vaïsse J (2017) Le Passé d'un Oxymore. Le Débat Français de Politique Étrangère. *Esprit* 2017/11: 75–91.
Vaissié C (2016) *Les Réseaux du Kremlin en France*. Les Petits Matins.
Vaujour N (2026) *Les Guerres des Mers*. Tallandier.
Weber G (2025) Zeitenwende à la française: Continuity and change in French foreign policy after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 27: 1153–1175.
Weinstein TI (2024) Discourse analysis. In Cyr J and Wallace Goodman S (eds) *Doing Good Qualitative Research*. Oxford University Press, pp.410–421.
Zajec O (2018) Le Concept D'intérêt National: Quelques Réflexions Sur le Rapport à Soi Français à L'horizon 2030. *Prospective et stratégie* 8/1: 71–83.

Author biography

Olivier Schmitt is Professor and head of research at the Institute for Military operations, Royal Danish Defence College. His latest book is Preparing for War. Strategy, Power and Military Change (Hurst/Oxford UP 2026).