

## FRANCE'S STRATEGY IN THE BALTIC REGION: MILITARY AND POLITICAL ASPECTS

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*This article examines the current military-political strategy of France in the Baltic region. This area has not traditionally been among the main priorities of French diplomacy. However, under President Emmanuel Macron, France pays closer attention to the Baltic Sea due to the growing tension between Russia and the West. According to France's key strategic documents, the government assesses the present-day situation mainly in a negative way, considering Russian actions as the main reason for the militarization of the region and expressing its readiness to show solidarity with NATO allies. On this basis, Paris is gradually increasing its military presence in the Baltic region, which now exceeds its contingents in the Middle East and the Sahel. For example, French forces still participate in the NATO air policing programme as well as in naval exercises, keeping the troops in Estonia within the Lynx mission. France's further activity in the region includes enhanced cooperation with Sweden and Finland after they accede to NATO, an already planned increase in military contingent in the Baltic States in 2023, and the development of the European Political Community project. The author concludes that even if France's presence in the Baltic does not yet pose a critical threat to Russian security, Paris's policy is becoming more pro-Atlantic to the detriment of previous statements about 'European sovereignty' and dialogue with Russia.*

### **Keywords:**

Baltic region, France, NATO, enhanced forward presence, militarization, wider Europe, Russia, Emmanuel Macron

### **Introduction**

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Recently, the Baltic region as a comprehensive security complex [1] has once again become a zone of increasing international tensions due to the confrontation between Russia and the West. With the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in 2022, it was in the Baltic that several crisis events and

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shifts indicating the deepening of the ‘cool war’ occurred [2]: the start of Sweden and Finland’s accession to NATO, the attempts by the Lithuanian leadership to restrict transit to the Kaliningrad region, the leaks on the Nord Stream pipelines and others. As indicated in the Russian Maritime Doctrine, at the Atlantic theatre, NATO continues a “direct confrontation with the Russian Federation and its allies”,<sup>1</sup> pushes its infrastructure further to the East and strengthens its military capabilities. In this region, various coalitions are being formed implying the containment of Russia to one degree or another: the Lublin Triangle or the Three Seas Initiative in particular [3], not to mention regular exercises including the US Navy.

Another notable trend in this context is the growing interest of European countries not geographically located in the Baltic region. Of these countries, the French Republic stands out, as its foreign policy traditionally focuses more on the South (the Mediterranean and Africa). Under President Emmanuel Macron, France has been making efforts to pay attention to the north-eastern borders of the European Union as well. Since 2014, the French Armed Forces have regularly participated in various allied formats of NATO in the Baltic including the programme of Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania and Estonia.<sup>2</sup> Paris is linked with the Baltic countries by numerous partnership documents: the Aachen Treaty with Germany (2019), bilateral declarations on cooperation in European affairs with Finland (2018) and Poland (2020), the Franco-Swedish letter of intent on defence cooperation (2021), etc. On President Macron’s initiative, France consistently supports the idea of strategic autonomy of the EU and has managed to involve the Nordic countries in its projects [4, p. 138—141, 178—183]. There are also some cases of interaction beyond Europe: for example, the participation of Finnish troops in the French peacekeeping mission in Lebanon or the involvement of Danish and Swedish contingents in Operation Barkhane in the Sahel [5].

It should be noted that today French foreign policy remains a popular research topic both for Russian and foreign authors. For instance, Obichkina explores the diplomatic strategy of the Fifth Republic in the modern world emphasizing the intention of Paris to play the role of an all-European leader [6]. Chernega studies the European policy of President Macron in detail and notes that the attempts to make Europe more autonomous meet Russian interests, yet having several nuances [7; 8]. For their part, Narochnitskaya and Kaninskaya reveal the applicability

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<sup>1</sup> On the Approval of Russia’s Maritime Doctrine: Presidential Decree № 512 of 31 July 2022, 2022, *Official legal information website*, URL: <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202207310001> (accessed 01.10.2022).

<sup>2</sup> La France face aux enjeux de sécurité en Baltique, 2019, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: [https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS\\_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique\\_vFR%20-%202019.pdf](https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique_vFR%20-%202019.pdf) (accessed 02.10.2022).

of the Gaullist doctrine to contemporary international realities [9; 10]. Among foreign authors, Gomart [11; 12], Duclos [13], de Montbrial [14] or Vaïsse [15] discuss numerous challenges French diplomacy now deals with.

In addition, many researchers focus not only on France's foreign policy as such, but also on its specific regional aspects or relations with particular countries. Thus, Fedorov identifies new trends in the Russian-French dialogue that emerged with Macron's coming to power [16] while the author of this article, together with Alekseenkova, shows the problems and prospects for the Paris—Rome axis [17]. The close relationship between the Fifth Republic and Germany [18; 19], the French leadership's attempts to form alliances with Greece [20], as well as France's efforts to exert influence in the Western Balkans [21], are among many other topics that also attract attention. But despite a certain number of studies, it is clear that the strategy of France in the Baltic is usually of little interest to researchers. Among the few works on this topic one should mention Olenchenko's article on the French approach to developing relations with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania [22]. The same topic is elaborated on in Zueva [23]. Several mentions can also be found in the analytical materials by Polish researcher Zerka [24] and the papers of invited experts of the Estonian ICDS Centre [25]. However, in such publications, the aim has not yet been set to consider the Baltic region as a coherent direction of French foreign policy. In some cases, the authors prefer to mention the relations of France with local states in an indirect way bearing in mind their ambiguous perception of Macron's initiatives at the European level [7; 8]. Similarly, as Escach observes, in the French academic community there is a certain stereotype about the Baltic as a 'wasteland' of European integration where there are no significant events for the entire Union as if any profound study is simply unnecessary [26]. Hence, here is still space for discussion on France's strategic line conducted by the current leadership in the Baltic including its reactions to major events of 2022 as well.

The aim of this study is to identify the key strategic directions of French diplomacy in the Baltic region. To achieve this, the study will analyse the types of statements made by Paris in its foreign policy doctrine regarding the Baltics, examine how France's presence in the region is established, as well as outline the prospects for future developments in the region. The main theoretical premise is the regional security complex theory developed by the Copenhagen school [27] because it allows interpreting the Baltic flank of NATO as an integral security cluster which France aspires to join. Given the growing militarization of this zone, it seems appropriate to focus on the military and political side of the French strategy to determine the scale of threats it can create for Russia's interests and security. From a methodological point of view, the study follows the analysis of the main documents of French foreign and defence policy (in qualitative terms), as well as the elements of comparative analysis (to compare France's defence capabilities in the Baltic with its presence in other regions; to contrast the prospects for cooperation with various countries).

## Security in the Baltic as seen by France

The study of the main doctrinal aspects of the French approach to the Baltic should begin by acknowledging that they were developed largely within the collective frameworks of the EU and NATO. According to many researchers, after the expansions to the East in the late 1990s — early 2000s, the trend of distancing from Russia as a way of internal consolidation got noticeable in both organisations [6, p. 178]. For Obichkina, “this choice contradicted the traditional geostrategy of the Fifth Republic, but France, not sharing it, did not actively resist it respecting the desire of the former socialist countries to break with the Soviet past” [6, p. 178]. As a result, Paris has to deal with a certain paradox: not considering it necessary to aggravate relations with Russia, French diplomacy nonetheless takes the path of confrontation being forced to gradually align itself with Eastern Europe (primarily with the Baltic States and Poland) in search of an all-European consensus. Some elements of this contradiction are evident in strategic documents where the problems of security on the eastern flank of NATO and, more specifically, in the Baltic region are raised more often.

For example, the 2013 White Paper on Defence and National Security has no direct mention of the Baltic Sea as such, and basically, it holds only a vague idea to maintain a dialogue with the Kremlin in the spirit of the Paris Charter of 1990.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, the 2017 Strategic Review published already under President Macron takes into account new divergences between Russia and the West and develops a slightly more detailed position on the issue. The authors of the document believe that the northern and eastern borders of Europe “are affected by Moscow’s intent to rebuild a sphere of influence” (including the Kaliningrad region as an outpost), and particularly in the Baltic, the Russian authorities observe an “aggressive posture”.<sup>4</sup> As a response to their constant ‘military demonstrations’, France is positive about Western capacity-building in the region expressing its readiness to participate in air and sea patrolling missions.<sup>5</sup> The Review emphasizes that contemporary international relations are characterized by a tendency for great powers competition, especially in terms of sea power (transport arteries control, underwater cables and pipelines security and so on), and the North Atlantic along with the Baltic Sea are no exception. In this regard, the French

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<sup>3</sup> Livre blanc défense et sécurité nationale — 2013, *Direction de l’information légale et administrative*, Paris, URL: [http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/le\\_livre\\_blanc\\_de\\_la\\_defense\\_2013.pdf](http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/le_livre_blanc_de_la_defense_2013.pdf), p. 54 (accessed 07.10.2022).

<sup>4</sup> *Révue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*, 2017, *France Diplomatie*, URL: [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-rs-def1018\\_cle0b6ef5-1.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-rs-def1018_cle0b6ef5-1.pdf), p. 24 (accessed 07.10.2022).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

leadership is particularly concerned about the strengthening of Russia's military potential: although a part of the Russian Army and the surface Navy is considered inferior to Western standards, the document recognizes that in general Moscow has "very significant capabilities for power projection in its near abroad".<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is proposed to maintain a bilateral dialogue on issues of mutual interest which Macron would do several times at meetings with Vladimir Putin in Versailles, St. Petersburg and Fort Bregançon (2017–2019).

Another significant mention of the Baltic region is made in the 2018 Military Programming Law (MPL) which defines the priorities of French defence policy for the next seven years. It states that participation in NATO initiatives in this zone is a feasible contribution to ensuring European security and, moreover, a practical confirmation of solidarity within the Alliance.<sup>7</sup> The government promises to pay increased attention to those types of weapons that could be necessary for conflict prevention and non-nuclear deterrence: small patrol ships, frigates, fighters, special forces equipment, etc. The participation in the NATO Enhance Forward Presence Programme and the Baltic Air Policing mission is perceived as one more outpost of French troops in the world along with advanced bases in Africa (Gabon, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Djibouti) and the Middle East (UAE).

The reasoning from the 2017 Review and the 2018 MPL is once again reproduced in the key document of 2021 — the so-called Strategic Update. In this document, the French leadership states that all the trends observed four years ago including the return of great powers rivalry, the scrapping of the former world order architecture, and the expansion of quantitative and qualitative diversity of crises, are only intensifying.<sup>8</sup> The Update points out that Russia continues to pursue its own strategic ambitions in different regions, to which Paris hoped to formulate a balanced response combining "firmness and dialogue". A significant part of this response should be defence and industrial cooperation with EU partners, and not only with Germany due to its traditional importance for French diplomacy [9; 10], but with other Baltic states like Sweden, Finland, Denmark and others. At the same time, special emphasis is still made on cooperation within NATO: France proposes to elaborate clear strategic guidelines for the Alliance (the reference to Macron's famous words on the "brain death") and supports the increase in

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<sup>6</sup> *Révue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*, 2017, *France Diplomatie*, URL: [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-rs-def1018\\_cle0b6ef5-1.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/2017-rs-def1018_cle0b6ef5-1.pdf), p. 24 (accessed 07.10.2022).

<sup>7</sup> Loi n° 2018–607 du 13 juillet 2018 relative à la programmation militaire pour les années 2019 à 2025 et portant diverses dispositions intéressant la défense, 2018, *Legifrance.fr*, URL: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000037192797/> (accessed 07.10.2022).

<sup>8</sup> Actualisation stratégique, 2021, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/dgris/REVUE%20STRAT%202021%2004%2002%202021%20FR.pdf>, p. 7–8 (accessed 08.10.2022).

financial obligations of the members. In its 2022 National Strategic Review, Paris acknowledges its expectation to be an “exemplary ally” through active participation in joint missions, including those in the Baltic region.<sup>9</sup>

Besides several texts mentioned above, during the same years, the Ministry of Armed Forces of France prepared a special document on the Baltic — a short brochure “France and the security challenges in the Baltic Sea region”. For all its brevity, this document is extremely remarkable being the first attempt of the Ministry to formulate a piece of strategy for this region. In addition to well-known points about the militarization of the Baltic Sea and the growth of Russian military power, the brochure highlights the fact that up to one third of the EU’s GDP is produced in the region (as of 2018) and 200,000 French citizens live there.<sup>10</sup> On this basis Paris views the protection of the Baltic countries as essential to its national security and considers their strategic interests a priority, alongside other global concerns like countering terrorism and limiting illegal immigration from Africa and the Middle East. The document concludes that despite the increase in defence spending, in case of a major conflict none of the regional powers are able to keep fighting for a long time, so mutual assistance could play a crucial role. Without any reservations, France promises to maintain close ties with them presenting itself as a reliable partner ready for inclusive cooperation in all types of armed forces.

If in these documents the French leadership formulates its views on the Baltic in a distinctly pro-Atlantic, pro-NATO way, then during his trips to the countries of the region, President Macron sought to use another rhetoric — a pro-European one. For instance, at the meeting with Danish Prime minister, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, in August 2018,<sup>11</sup> he stressed that, without denying the leading role of NATO, the Europeans should find their own strategic autonomy — the ability to make independent decisions and develop European defence capabilities.<sup>12</sup> A little later, in a conversation with his Finnish colleague, Sauli Niinistö, he reminded about the desire for a uniform strategic culture (the same interpretation of main threats), as well as of France’s intention, then

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<sup>9</sup> Revue nationale stratégique, 2022, *République Française*, URL: <http://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/uploads/2022/11/revue-nationale-strategique-07112022.pdf>, p. 39. (accessed 29.11.2022).

<sup>10</sup> La France face aux enjeux de sécurité en Baltique, 2019, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: [https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS\\_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique\\_vFR%20-%202019.pdf](https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique_vFR%20-%202019.pdf) (accessed 02.10.2022).

<sup>11</sup> Conférence de presse conjointe du Président de la République et du Premier Ministre Danois, 2018, *Elysee.fr*, URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/08/30/conference-de-presse-conjointe-du-president-de-la-republique-et-du-premier-ministre-danois> (accessed 08.10.2022).

<sup>12</sup> Those words were also addressed directly to Copenhagen because at that time the latter did not yet formally participate in the Common Foreign and Security Policy of the EU.

clearly declared, to follow the path of a 'Greater Europe' together with Russia.<sup>13</sup> Later, in Poland (2020) Macron stressed the importance of defence industrial cooperation within the EU referring to the possible participation of Warsaw in the next-generation tank project (MGCS).<sup>14</sup> During his visits to Vilnius and Riga (2020), the French leader pointed out that like the entire European Union, France and the Baltic States faced common challenges from ensuring technological sovereignty to restoring the economy after the COVID-19 crisis or protecting democratic institutions [23, p. 193]. In other words, the French president tried to convince his colleagues of the applicability of his 'European project' for the Baltic region and to show that he considered the states of Northern and Eastern Europe full-fledged parts of European integration. Yet the response was generally quite cold: most above-mentioned countries still assumed that only NATO could give firm security guarantees to the detriment of Macron's ideas on strategic autonomy and especially on the "European army" [8].

Hence, it is possible to say that France's policy towards the Baltic region is currently based on two considerations: 1) the increase in military and political threats provoked by Russia's actions (as Paris believes following a common Western narrative); 2) the readiness for deeper cooperation with local allies. Although France tends to create an autonomous European defence potential and maintain a dialogue with Moscow, across its basic documents Paris interprets the situation in the region basically in the same way as NATO in general whose priority is out of any doubt.

### **French military presence in the region**

Based on the above, it is possible to state that the use of a military contingent participating in various missions and initiatives under the auspices of NATO is a key element of France's strategy in the Baltic. It seems necessary to specify what kind of capabilities France has at this theatre and what tasks they are focused on.

The Army is represented by a unit of 300 people stationed in Tapa, Estonia, as a part of the Lynx Mission (the name of the French element of the NATO multinational battlegroup under British command). This mission was launched in 2017 shortly after the approval of the Enhanced Forward Presence programme and was prolonged annually: first on a rotational basis (with the redeployment of French forces from Estonia to Lithuania and back), then with an unchanged basing point.

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<sup>13</sup> Conférence de presse conjointe d'Emmanuel Macron et de Sauli Niinistö, Président de la République de Finlande, 2018, *Elysee.fr*, URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/08/30/conference-de-presse-conjointe-demmanuel-macron-et-de-sauli-niinisto-president-de-la-republique-de-finlande> (accessed 08.10.2022).

<sup>14</sup> Déclaration conjointe du Président Emmanuel Macron et de M. Andrzej Duda, Président de la République de Pologne, 2020, *Elysee.fr*, URL: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/03/declaration-conjointe-du-president-emmanuel-macron-et-de-m-andrzej-duda-president-de-la-republique-de-pologne> (accessed 08.10.2022).

Initially, the Lynx was planned to be completed in 2022 but against the background of the aggravation of the conflict in Ukraine, President Macron decided to keep the mission functioning for one more year at least. By that time, in addition to the manpower, it included 12 Leclerc tanks, 8 VBCI infantry fighting vehicles, about 30 light armoured vehicles and engineering equipment.<sup>15</sup> Currently, the main task of such contingent is to ensure interaction with the British, Danish and Estonian units located in the neighbourhood, to improve combat skills in wooded areas and in cold season conditions.

It should be added that during major NATO exercises, Paris demonstrates its readiness to project additional forces in different zones close to the Baltic. For example, 2,000 French soldiers and officers and 400 pieces of equipment were sent to the Brilliant Jump exercises held in February – March 2022 on the territory of Norway. 3,200 soldiers participated in the Cold Response exercise the same year.<sup>16</sup>

The French Air and Space Force participates in NATO Air Policing missions along the borders of Poland and the Baltic States as part of its presence in the region. Even in 2014, up to four Rafale and Mirage-2000 fighters were deployed at the Malbork air base, then at Šiauliai (2016) and Ämari (2018, 2022). According to the French Ministry of Armed Forces, after the beginning of the Russian military operation in Ukraine, the flights of French aircraft on the eastern borders of NATO in some chronological periods acquired an almost daily character; moreover, long-distance flights from French bases in Mont-de-Marsan and Istres began to be practised.<sup>17</sup> Since then, France is one of the most active participants in air patrolling in terms of the total number of takeoffs (2,800 by 2019) and hours spent in the sky (3,600).<sup>18</sup> Among other things, the pilots improve their skills in identifying targets and train various actions in case of a top-level alert.

At the same time, the French Navy also continues to be active in the Baltic Sea and, more broadly, in the North Atlantic. In June 2022, Paris participated in the BALTOPS exercises, where the US Navy reportedly tested promising

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<sup>15</sup> Dossier de presse. Mission Opérationnelle LYNX Estonie, 2022, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: [https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/operations/20211230\\_LYNX12\\_Dossier-de-presse.pdf](https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/operations/20211230_LYNX12_Dossier-de-presse.pdf) (accessed 10.10.2022).

<sup>16</sup> Renforcement du flanc est de l'OTAN, 2022, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/europe/europe-du-nord-lest/otan/renforcement-du-flanc-est-lotan> (accessed 10.10.2022).

<sup>17</sup> La France face aux enjeux de sécurité en Baltique, 2019, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: [https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS\\_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique\\_vFR%20-%202019.pdf](https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique_vFR%20-%202019.pdf) (accessed 02.10.2022).

<sup>18</sup> La France face aux enjeux de sécurité en Baltique, 2019, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: [https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS\\_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique\\_vFR%20-%202019.pdf](https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique_vFR%20-%202019.pdf) (accessed 02.10.2022).



prototypes of submarine drones. However, French forces deployed to the region used older military hardware, including the Atlantique 2 aircraft, the Sagittaire minesweeper, and the Latouche-Tréville frigate. Notably, the BALTOPS exercise was the last action for the Latouche-Tréville frigate before its decommissioning. Such a combination of forces clearly showed the focus on anti-submarine and mine warfare training. Paris usually deploys its more versatile naval forces, which are capable of fulfilling a wider range of tasks, in the Northern and Norwegian Seas, rather than in the Baltic. However, in 2022, the deployment of a Mistral-class amphibious assault ship in the region highlighted the Navy's attention towards the Baltic, as did the deployment of a Charles de Gaulle aircraft carrier and escort group two years prior. Moreover, just in the North Atlantic one Triomphant-class ballistic missile submarine and one Rubis-class attack submarine are usually on duty.

France continues to collaborate with the Baltic countries in the field of cybersecurity. In particular, Paris has shown keen interest in partnering with Estonia, with whom they signed a declaration on bilateral activities in digital security in 2020. French cyber specialists have been actively participating in the Cyber Coalition exercises, which are usually hosted by Estonia and organized by the Allied Command Transformation, led by French generals since 2009.

Last but not least, Paris is trying to strengthen its position in the region by competing for arms trade tenders. In 2020–2021, the French defence industry had some hopes regarding Poland and Finland because these two countries planned to upgrade their fighter capabilities, so the great opportunity to offer them Rafale jets did occur. Getting a share in the Finnish market looked particularly promising, given that, as a part of its “security dilemma”, Helsinki perceived the Fifth Republic as one of the most reliable partners in Western Europe [28] and, unlike Poland or the Baltic States, highly appreciated defence cooperation within the EU [29]. However, the American defence industry ultimately maintained greater influence in both cases. Furthermore, it was revealed in the fall of 2022 that the delivery of 15 CAESAR systems, which had been agreed upon with Denmark five years ago, was partially redirected to Ukraine with Copenhagen's consent. As a result, Germany remains the only major defence industry partner of France in the Baltic Sea region. Together with Berlin Paris conducts a significant part of PESCO projects and continues to design a new fighter and battle tank [18].

While the French military presence in the Baltic region is diverse, it remains relatively small, and thus may not meet the expectations of its transatlantic allies. According to RAND corporation experts in 2017, in the event of a significant escalation in the region, France would be unable to deploy large forces due to its military's primary focus on securing French territory and engagements in other parts of the world. These challenges persist to this day. [30]. Meanwhile, in French terms, the current presence in the Baltic can already be called signif-

icant. In 2019, the Ministry of Armed Forces reported 4,000 soldiers deployed in the region annually (in total for all types of troops).<sup>19</sup> Without further data, it can be assumed that the figure will increase by the end of 2022–2023, but even without any change it would exceed the French contingents in Iraq (600 people) and the Sahel (3,000 before the end of the Barkhane). It is noteworthy that in France, different political parties generally support the deployment of troops in the Baltic in such volumes. For example, during the elections to the European Parliament in 2019 even Marine Le Pen (often accused of having too close contacts with the Kremlin) visited Estonia where she said that the fight against the Soviet threat at one time also “formed the DNA” of her party.<sup>20</sup> An exception to this trend is Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of La France Insoumise (far left), who has repeatedly refused to acknowledge small Baltic countries as part of the ‘true’ Europe, and has urged the Elysée Palace not to engage in unnecessary confrontation with Russia [31].

### **The prospects of the French strategy in the Baltic**

Given the systematic involvement of Paris in the region observed last year, as well as the escalating tensions between Russia and the West in 2022, it can be suggested that during Macron’s second presidential term, the Baltic direction of foreign policy will receive increased attention and will not be neglected. Moreover, as of autumn 2022, at least three axes of further activity of French diplomacy are visible here.

Firstly, France will further enhance its defence and political relations with Finland and Sweden following their application for NATO membership. In August 2022, the French National Assembly ratified the protocols for the membership of both countries without any preconditions (unlike Turkey). The ratification received significant support from various established parties, with 209 deputies voting in favour and only left-populist politicians opposing it with 46 votes. Once the accession process is completed, it is possible for the cooperation between Paris and Helsinki to expand to various areas such as the entry of French ships into Finnish ports, air patrols along the Finnish-Russian border, or the deployment of additional land forces in exchange for the renewal of Finnish presence in Lebanon. However, the room for cooperation with Stockholm seems to be quite larger. In particular, the intensification of contacts between special forces (for which there is a common ground like the joint fight against terrorism in the Sahel in 2021–2022 within the Takuba Mission), the consolidation of defence industrial

<sup>19</sup> La France face aux enjeux de sécurité en Baltique, 2019, *Ministère des Armées*, URL: [https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS\\_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique\\_vFR%20-%202019.pdf](https://www.archives.defense.gouv.fr/content/download/551358/9392188/file/DGRIS_La%20France%20face%20aux%20enjeux%20de%20s%C3%A9curit%C3%A9%20en%20Baltique_vFR%20-%202019.pdf) (accessed 02.10.2022).

<sup>20</sup> Mission séduction compliquée pour Marine Le Pen en Estonie, 2022, *Le Monde*, URL: [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2019/05/15/mission-seduction-compliquee-pour-marine-le-pen-en-estonie\\_5462365\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2019/05/15/mission-seduction-compliquee-pour-marine-le-pen-en-estonie_5462365_823448.html) (accessed 29.11.2022).

ties (due to a high quality of the Swedish defence economy) and the interaction of Navies and coast guard services are likely to take place. The historical proximity of the two countries — the French origins of the House of Bernadotte — also should not be underestimated as a factor.

Secondly, the French Ministry of Armed Forces has already announced the strengthening of its capabilities on the territory of the Baltic States in 2023. The recent announcement of France's Lynx programme signifies the introduction of new infantry units equipped with additional Griffon armoured vehicles. Additionally, there is speculation about the deployment of more Rafale fighters in Lithuania. These developments are expected to strengthen the defence cooperation between France and the Baltic countries, with continued contact between their defence ministries, general staffs, and military academies [23, p. 193]. On a very limited scale, the latter are able to become customers for the French defence industry as the interest of the Lithuanian leadership in CAESAR artillery has recently shown. Such equipment can be acquired both for their own needs and for the subsequent transfer to Ukraine like in the Danish case.

Thirdly, Macron will certainly continue pursuing his vision of a Greater Europe, but with a shift away from his previous approach of openness towards the Kremlin. In October 2022, the founding summit of the new multilateral format proposed by the Elysée Palace, the European Political Community (EPC), took place in Prague. This event brought together 44 states from Iceland to Azerbaijan with the notable exceptions of Russia and Belarus. The pro-Ukrainian nature of the EPC became obvious almost immediately since the results of the summit were reduced to unsuccessful attempts by the European Union to expand the range of countries imposing sanctions against Russia and to create a special fund for Kyiv's weapons purchases. Due to this, the previous French ideas of a direct dialogue with Moscow accompanied by numerous reservations even before the start of the operation in Ukraine [32] were almost forgotten because of having no chance of support within the European Union and especially among the Baltic States. Conversely, the EPC initiative demonstrates Paris's commitment to promoting solidarity with Eastern European countries based on a shared goal of countering the 'Russian threat', while also providing an additional political framework for deeper engagement in the region.

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In conclusion, the ongoing intensification of French diplomacy in the Baltic region appears to conflict with Russia's interests. Instead of offering a new vision and reviving relations with Moscow, France's primary objective is to strengthen its position as a reliable NATO member and contribute to the Alliance's common defence potential in the region. France's interest in defending the eastern borders of the Alliance is seen as a clear indicator of solidarity by its allies, as evident from positive assessments in expert papers from Poland [24] and Germany [18]. The French strategy in the Baltic as is would not pose

a direct threat to the security of the Russian Federation given the small scale of French forces involved. But today it is closely linked to the activities of other NATO countries. As a result, the French strategy in the region is getting more and more unfriendly. Any further build-up or, otherwise, the minimization of France's military presence in the region will depend on the confrontation between Russia and the West.

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