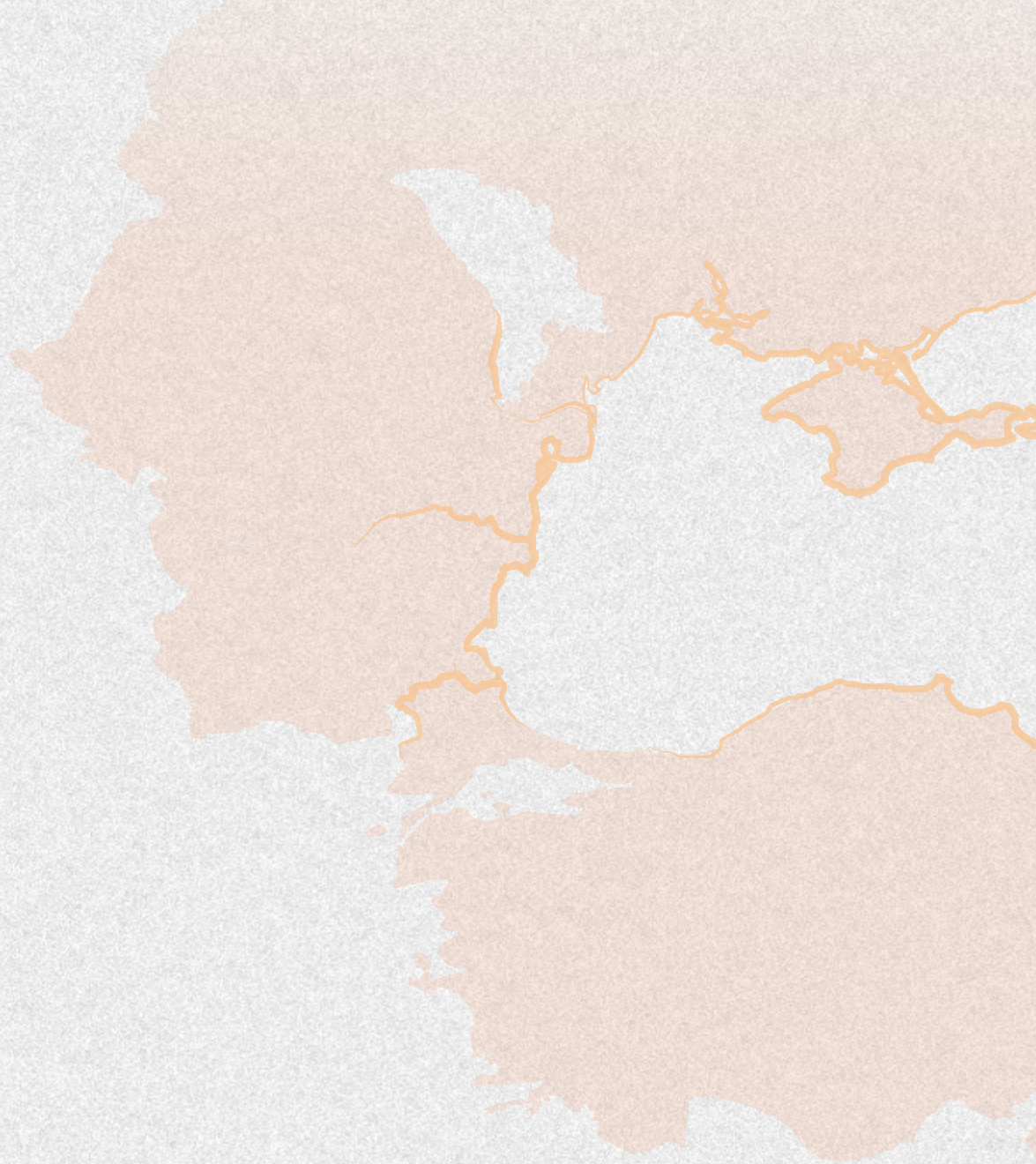




French Foreign Policy in the Black Sea



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INTRODUCTION

In 1536, the King of France, Francis I, established an alliance with the Ottoman Emperor, Suleiman I (known as the Magnificent). This alliance broke an important taboo, the Ottomans having been hitherto diplomatically isolated by the Catholic rulers of Europe as Muslim invaders. Less remarked on is that this is perhaps the first significant diplomatic engagement¹ of the French state in the region of the Black Sea. It would prove durable, with the alliance surviving until Napoleon's expedition to Egypt over two and a half centuries later. France's diplomatic interest in the region continued to grow, reaching its peak in the 19th century with the Crimean war. Despite this long history, there are few studies of Paris' actions in the Black Sea. In this report, we will attempt to partly correct this through an overview of French foreign policy in the region over the last thirty years.

In a first part, we will examine in detail France's bilateral relations with Black Sea countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union. We will then evaluate whether this adds up to a coherent strategy with regard to the region. Thirdly, this report will examine which factors are most important in determining French foreign policy in and around the Black Sea. Finally, we will briefly survey how its policy has changed since the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th 2023.

I FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE BLACK SEA SINCE 1990

The Caucasus

Although French policymaking about the countries in the Caucasus is organisationally grouped together in the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (henceforth MEAE, Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Etrangères) in the directorate for continental Europe under the deputy directorate for the

¹ I.e., excluding marriages.

Caucasus and Central Asia², it is difficult to speak of a French ‘Caucasus policy’ as a whole. This is due, firstly, to the fact that relations with Armenia and Azerbaijan are primarily determined by aspects specific to these countries: the large Armenian diaspora in France, and Azerbaijan’s status as an important oil and gas producer, respectively. We will therefore start by analysing French policy toward these two countries separately, then look at its position on the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, and finally consider in more detail the Franco-Georgian relationship.

I Armenia

As the MEAE presentation of Franco-Armenian relations writes, these relations are “symbolised and sustained notably by the presence in France of a sizeable community of Armenian origin”.³ Indeed, France is home to the second-largest Armenian diaspora in the world: French-Armenian organisations estimate it at about 600,000 members, of whom two-thirds were born in France.⁴ Due to this, France has particularly strong relations with Armenia; a 2010 parliamentary report described these relations as “particularly dense”.⁵ In 2001, the French parliament voted to recognise the Armenian genocide, one of the first European countries to do so, while several attempts to criminalise its denial were passed by the parliament but struck down by the Constitutional Court.

The good relations between France and Armenia are only partly reflected in their economic relations. Trade between France and Armenia is not very significant for either side: France had a market share of only 2.2% in Armenian imports in 2018; for this reason, a 2021 report of the Senate wrote that economic relations were “not at the level they should be”.⁶ However, it is the second-largest foreign investor in the country behind Russia, with an FDI stock of around 380 million euros, mainly concentrated in the food, banking and utility sectors.⁷

Finally, cultural relations are more well-developed than economic ones. The French-Armenian University has a yearly enrolment of over 1,000,⁸ while over 1,700 Armenians were studying in France in 2019-20. Furthermore, Armenia is also a member of the Organisation internationale de la Francophonie; its 2018 summit was organised in Yerevan.⁹

II Azerbaijan

France and Azerbaijan have had mostly good relations since the latter’s independence, despite widespread French sympathy for Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno Karabakh. Indeed, France was

2 Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, ‘Organigramme de l’administration centrale.’

3 Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, ‘Arménie - Relations bilatérales.’

4 Le Point, ‘Les Arméniens en France.’

5 Assemblée Nationale, ‘La Situation Dans Le Caucase Du Sud.’

6 Senat, ‘Haut-Karabagh : Dix Enseignements d’un Conflit Qui Nous Concerne.’

7 Direction générale du Trésor, ‘Relations Bilatérales - Arménie.’

8 Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, ‘Arménie - Relations bilatérales.’

9 Senat, ‘Haut-Karabagh : Dix Enseignements d’un Conflit Qui Nous Concerne.’

Evolution des exportations et des importations françaises vers l'Azerbaïdjan (en M EUR)

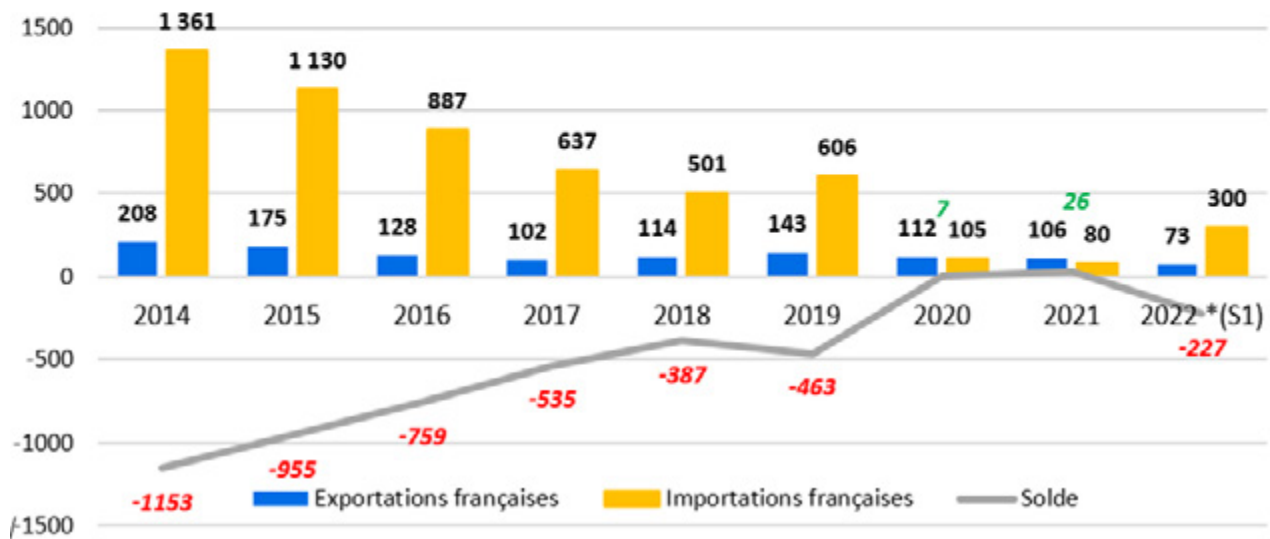


Figure 1. French trade with Azerbaijan since 2014, in million euros.

Blue: French exports. Yellow: French imports. Line: trade balance. Source: Direction générale du Trésor

the second country (after Turkey) to recognise Azerbaijani independence, and cultural cooperation between the two countries is well-developed, if not as much as between France and Armenia, with about 700 students at the Franco-Azerbaijani university and the same number studying in France. In addition to this, France was the first country visited both by current president Ilham Aliyev, and his father and predecessor Heydar Aliyev.¹⁰

The most important aspect of the relationship (apart from France's co-presidency of the Minsk group, which is discussed below) is oil. Indeed, Azerbaijan has consistently been France's most important trading partner in the Caucasus by far, and this is almost entirely due to Azeri exports of oil to France. While French exports to Azerbaijan have oscillated between 100 and 200 million euros annually (a similar level as exports to Georgia), Azerbaijani exports have historically been much higher, between 500 and 1,400 million euros. These slowly decreased from 2014, collapsed in 2020 and 2021, before increasing again in the first semester of 2022, due to EU attempts to diversify oil imports away from Russia.¹¹ Since 2000, (mainly crude) petroleum has always accounted for over 95% of these exports.¹² Furthermore, three quarters of France's investments in Azerbaijan are in the energy sector; the two biggest private French energy companies, are present in the country. Their presence is, however, much smaller than that of BP's.¹³ Similarly, France has never been the largest importer of Azerbaijani oil, with its imports being an order of magnitude lower than Italy's.¹⁴

10 Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 'Azerbaïdjan - Relations bilatérales.'

11 Direction générale du Trésor, 'Relations Bilatérales - Azerbaïdjan.'

12 OEC, 'Azerbaijan (AZE) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners.'

13 Assemblée nationale, 'Les Relations Politiques et Économiques Entre La France et l'Azerbaïdjan.'

14 OEC, 'Azerbaijan (AZE) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners.'

III The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict

France has been involved in the Azerbaijani-Armenian conflict over Nagorno Karabakh for a long time: in 1994, it was appointed co-chairman of the OSCE's Minsk Group, the body convened to facilitate a peace settlement between the two countries after the end of the first war in 1994. France's position on the conflict until the second war in 2020 reflected its status as a mediator. As the director for continental Europe at the MEAE explained in 2017, this position was based on two elements: firstly, that a solution could be found "only by dialogue" and secondly, full adherence to the Madrid principles, a set of six fundamental elements proposed by the US, Russia and France to serve as a basis for the resolution to the conflict in 2009 which were never fully accepted by either side. Furthermore, France pursued a policy of "perfect symmetry" in its export of weaponry to Armenia and Azerbaijan.¹⁵

In the aftermath of the second Nagorno Karabakh war in 2020, French neutrality in the conflict was heavily criticised by the report of the French Senate on the war, co-written by a socialist and a center-right senator. In particular, the report criticised then-Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian for initially not condemning the Azerbaijani offensive, as well as the EU's failure to use its economic levers of influence to help solve the conflict.¹⁶ Furthermore, shortly after the signing of the Russian-mediated ceasefire, both the Senate and the National Assembly voted by large, cross-party majorities to call on the government to recognise the independence of Nagorno Karabakh, although the latter refused to do so.¹⁷

While French efforts after the war were still largely focused on mediating issues such as prisoner exchanges, the Russian invasion of Ukraine appears to have provoked a change of policy. In October 2022, French president Emmanuel Macron declared in an interview that Russia was trying to destabilise the Caucasus "to divide and weaken us all" and had "played Azerbaijan's game" during the war. He also said that Azerbaijan had launched "a terrible war" in 2020 and that France would "never abandon" Armenians,¹⁸ leading Baku to launch a media offensive against him.¹⁹ While it is too early to judge whether this marks a definite change in French policy to a more explicitly pro-Armenian position, taking advantage of Yerevan's disillusionment with Russia as an ally, France does seem to be moving toward a more active involvement in the dispute.

It remains to be seen how France's approach will change after the September 2023 agreement between Baku and separatist representatives, under which the self-proclaimed republic accepted Azerbaijan's terms and was subsequently disarmed. The agreement was followed by a decree dated September 28, 2023, in which the president of the unrecognized NKR announced the self-liquidation of the entity, which will cease to exist on January 1, 2024.²⁰

15 Assemblée nationale, 'Les Relations Politiques et Économiques Entre La France et l'Azerbaïdjan'

16 Senat, 'Haut-Karabagh : Dix Enseignements d'un Conflit Qui Nous Concerne.'

17 Guez, 'L'Assemblée nationale vote en faveur de la reconnaissance du Haut-Karabagh.'

18 France 24, 'Moscou et Bakou s'en prennent aux déclarations de Macron sur le Haut-Karabakh.'

19 Natiqqizi, 'Azerbaijan Public TV Enlists Singing Children to Insult Macron.'

20 JamNews, 'The unrecognised NKR will cease to exist on 1 January by its own decision'

IV Georgia

Relations between France and Georgia did not develop very rapidly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Indeed, it took until 1993 for a French embassy to be opened in Tbilisi; before that, the ambassador to Russia was still also ambassador to Georgia ex officio, and for much of the rest of the decade Georgia was still partly covered by the embassy in Moscow. This situation started to change from 1998, with senior French diplomats and officials starting to visit Georgia, due to the increasing realisation that it was here to stay and could play an important role as a corridor for the export of Caspian oil to Europe.²¹

As was the case with other Western countries, the relationship really gained an impulse only after the Rose Revolution and the election of Mikhail Saakashvili as president in 2003-2004. In their aftermath, Western diplomatic and economic interest in the country grew considerably, and France was no exception. The fact that Georgia was now seen as the main success story of democratisation in the Caucasus led to a boom in interest from both Western governments and societies. Indeed, as can be seen on Figure 2, Georgian exports to and imports from France rapidly and consistently increased after 2003 until the war with Russia in 2008. In addition to this, in 2004, then-French ambassador to Georgia Salomé Zourabichvili became Georgian Foreign Minister, although this did not have much of a long-term impact on the relationship.



Figure 2. Source: National Statistics Office of Georgia

21 Jghenti, telephone interview with author.

However, the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 marked a major break in relations between France and Georgia. Indeed, the invasion was taken by European countries as a reminder that Georgia was still in the Russian backyard, and French interest in Georgia declined as a result. Already before the war in April 2008 in Bucharest, France had been instrumental in blocking, alongside Germany, the US initiative to give a Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine.²² In French eyes, the war confirmed that what they saw as an overly aggressive policy toward Russia had been a mistake, and strengthened its opposition to proposing Georgia NATO membership.²³ In virtue of having assumed the EU's rotating presidency in the second half of 2008, Nicolas Sarkozy was dispatched to mediate the conflict. While the French mediation avoided a worst-case outcome for Georgia, it also demonstrated that the West was not ready to actively support Tbilisi in face of the belligerent Russia, thus confirming the results of the Bucharest summit.

Since the war, this French 'revealed preference' has meant that relations have never returned to their peak in the early Saakashvili era. In 2010, a report from the National Assembly recommended that "France must reaffirm its position [in opposition to Ukrainian and Georgian NATO membership] with force", and emphasised that "no lasting solution in the Caucasus can be imagined without consultation with Russia".²⁴ This would remain the main thrust of French policy toward Georgia until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, especially after the coming to power of Georgian Dream in 2012.

Romania and Bulgaria

France's relationship with these south-east European states is shaped by the strong French cultural influence in the region. This is especially the case for Romania. Indeed, Romanian national reformers in the 19th century were strongly influenced by French language and culture in their project to 're-latinise' Romanian and develop a national culture distinct from its Slavic neighbours. In consequence, knowledge of the French language is still widespread in the country: according to the French embassy in Bucharest, it is spoken by about 15% of Romanians, or 3 million people.²⁵ With Bulgaria, while French influence was not as strong due to the lack of a linguistic connection, cultural relations have also been well-developed since the mid-19th century.²⁶

Due to this, France strongly supported both Romania's and Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, being particularly involved in providing Phare support (i.e., bilateral assistance to improve candidates' public administration) to both countries.²⁷ The two countries' accession to the EU in 2007 was followed by the signing of treaties on strategic partnership in 2008. Of the two, however, the relationship with Romania is more important for France on all fronts.

22 Cadier, 'Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia'.

23 Assemblée Nationale, 'La Situation Dans Le Caucase Du Sud'.

24 Assemblée Nationale, 'La Situation Dans Le Caucase Du Sud', 67, 69.

25 Ambassade de France en Roumanie, 'La francophonie en Roumanie'.

26 Ambassade de France en Bulgarie, 'Histoire des relations franco-bulgares'.

27 Assemblée Nationale, 'Rapport Sur Le Projet de Loi Autorisant La Ratification Du Traité Relatif à l'adhésion de La République de Bulgarie et de La Roumanie à l'Union Européenne'.

Indeed, while French economic relations with Bulgaria are not very developed in either direction, France is the third-biggest importer from and sixth-biggest exporter to Romania. In addition, it is the third-largest foreign investor in the country, with an FDI stock of 8.6 billion euros.²⁸ Furthermore, the defence partnership is also well-developed, and has grown in importance after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine: in early November, the French minister of defence opened a new military camp in Cincu, in central Romania, which is to serve as “its principal base on Europe’s eastern flank.”²⁹

Greece and Turkey

Since the turn of the century, France’s relationship with Turkey has been in a downward spiral. This is due to three main factors: France’s recognition of the Armenian genocide, its position on Turkey’s EU candidacy, and its relationship with Greece, which is why we will also cover it despite it not bordering the Black Sea.

As previously stated, France recognised the Armenian genocide in 2001, and this “precipitated the degradation of relations between the two states”, according to Didier Billion, deputy director of the foreign policy think tank IRIS.³⁰ However, while this did significantly worsen relations, it is the French veto of Turkish EU membership which would go on to become the real sticking point over the past two decades. The issue was first raised in French public debate by far-right parties as a stick to use to beat the EU, and, in a pattern that would go on to be repeated many times, it was then adopted by the center-right party (then UMP, now Les Républicains) under Nicolas Sarkozy in order to shore up their right flank from political attacks. Furthermore, the issue led to a revision of the Constitution designed to ensure a referendum in the case of Turkish accession, and was raised again and again in French public debate in by the UMP to attack parties on its left, notably during the presidential and European elections from 2007 to 2012. This made the prospect of Turkish EU membership thoroughly politically toxic, and ensured that Sarkozy’s socialist successor, François Hollande, did not lift this veto.³¹ For Billion, this episode, mainly driven by the needs of domestic politics, marked a “rupture” in the “long-standing relations that France had maintained with Turkey”. Furthermore, after the French parliament approved a law penalising the denial of the Armenian genocide in 2012 (which was shortly afterwards struck down by the Constitutional Court), Turkey suspended its political and military cooperation with France.³²

Bilateral relations have deteriorated further under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron. This process started in 2016, when “the Syrian and Libyan conflicts uncovered diverging interests between France and Turkey”.³³ In response, France increased its backing of Cyprus’ and Greece’s claims to their exclusive economic zones (which contain oil and gas deposits and are disputed by Turkey), and sent

28 Direction générale du Trésor, ‘Relations Économiques Bilatérales Avec La Roumanie.’

29 Vincent, ‘A Cincu, en Roumanie, l’armée française finalise sa principale base sur le flanc est de l’Europe, où 750 soldats sont déployés.’

30 Billion, ‘France - Turquie : Entre Tensions et Normalisations. . . . De La Difficulté de Parvenir à Une Relation Apaisée.’

31 Ibid.

32 Sénat, ‘La Turquie : Une Relation Complexe Mais Incontournable.’

33 Marghelis, ‘The French Military’s Perception of the Turkish Military and Turkey’s Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean.’

warships to the Eastern Mediterranean in a show of support.³⁴ This led to several incidents between the Turkish and French navies in the area, further increasing tensions.³⁵ In 2021, France and Greece signed a bilateral defence agreement, including a mutual assistance clause and Greek purchases of French frigates, shortly after Greece had purchased 24 Rafale fighters. This was widely seen as being based on their mutual apprehension of Turkey, which an IFRI report called “the concrete basis for the rapprochement.”³⁶

Russia and Ukraine

Russia is the largest country on the Black Sea, and this is reflected in French foreign policy’s preoccupation with it. All of the reports produced by the French National Assembly or Senate on France’s relations with other Black Sea countries mention the need to take into account Russia’s interests in the region. Furthermore, France’s Ukraine policy was largely determined by its desired relationship with Russia. Indeed, as David Cadier writes, “probably more than any other European state, France has had a ‘special relationship’ with Russia.”³⁷ Since the Second World War, this has mainly been a reflection of it being the western European power most inclined to assert its independence from the United States and pursue a more autonomous foreign policy, in stark contrast to the United Kingdom and Germany especially.

For this reason, French policy on Russia was driven by the need to use it as a counterweight to American influence in Europe. During the 1990s, when Russia was too deeply mired in its domestic economic problems to play a significant role in European politics, this did not have much importance, and France supported the accession to the EU and NATO of the former Warsaw Pact states. If it showed some reluctance towards the process, this was due to other reasons: domestic politics and fear of losing influence in a Union with a reunified Germany and twice as many members.

In the first decade of the 21st century, France developed an important economic relationship with Russia, in particular as a foreign investor. While France did not need imported energy as much as Germany did, Total became a significant foreign player in the Russian gas market.³⁸ By 2011, France was the third-largest source of foreign investments in Russia (excluding tax havens).³⁹ It would maintain that position up until the eve of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, at which point French companies were the largest foreign employers in Russia with 160,000 employees.⁴⁰ In addition, as a signal of his desire to treat Russia as a partner and not as an enemy, Sarkozy initiated the sale of Mistral amphibious assault warships to Moscow in 2011.

In 2008, at the NATO summit in Bucharest, France joined with Germany to block the offer of a MAP

34 ‘France Sends Jets and Ships to Tense East Mediterranean.’

35 Marghelis, ‘The French Military’s Perception of the Turkish Military and Turkey’s Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean.’

36 Schmid and Domingues dos Santos, ‘Le partenariat franco-hellénique.’

37 Cadier, ‘Continuity and Change in France’s Policies towards Russia.’

38 Gustafson, ‘The LNG Tanker with the Big White Moustache.’

39 Assemblée Nationale, ‘Rapport Sur La Politique Française et Européenne Vis-à-Vis de La Russie.’

40 Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, ‘Relations bilatérales - Russie.’

to Georgia and Ukraine. This was largely due to the reasons outlined above: it viewed it as part of the Bush administration's agenda to increase US power in Europe and decrease European autonomy, especially after France and Germany had joined with Putin to oppose the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Its reaction to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 would follow the same pattern: one of the main priorities was to keep this intra-European and not involve the United States in the resolution of the conflict, which drove the creation of the 'Minsk Group' of Germany, France, Ukraine and Russia. Having initially opposed heavy sanctions, it eventually supported them, and cancelled the Mistral deal after strong pressure from the UK, US and Poland. After 2015, French diplomacy became focused on trying to find common ground with Russia in order to prevent the conflict between it and the West "escalating into a permanent and structural conflict", as Cadier writes.⁴¹ Indeed, a Senate report published in October 2015 stressed that "we must restart and deepen dialogue with Russia in order to prevent an impasse".⁴²

This policy was, if anything, reinforced by Emmanuel Macron – notably, he invited Vladimir Putin to Versailles in 2017 two weeks after becoming president. He would also be the Western leader that talked to the Russian president the most in the months preceding the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It is only after this that French policy toward Russia changed, as will be discussed in the last section.

II IS THERE A COHERENT FRENCH BLACK SEA POLICY?

Having examined France's policy toward each of the countries in the Black Sea region, we will now evaluate to what extent it is possible to speak of a 'Black Sea policy' as a coherent whole.

While there has never been an official guideline or strategy for engagement with the Black Sea countries in France, the EU launched its 'Black Sea Synergy' in 2007, after the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, whose "primary task" is "the development of cooperation within the Black Sea region and also between the region as a whole and the European Union". This included, among others, more active engagement in solving the 'frozen conflicts' of the region as well as promoting sustainable development in the region. However, the Commission's communication announcing the initiative explicitly said that it was "not its intention to propose an independent Black Sea strategy, since the broad EU policy towards the region is already set out in the pre-accession strategy with Turkey, the

41 Cadier, 'Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia'.

42 Sénat, 'Les Relations Avec La Russie : Comment Sortir de l'impasse?'

ENP and the Strategic Partnership with Russia".⁴³

This statement, somewhat modified, also goes to the heart of France's action in the Black Sea. Rather than a coherent whole, it is stuck in the crossfire of other, more well-defined French policy objectives, whether in relation to the European Union, to Russia, or to the Middle East – all regions with which France has a much longer history of engagement and much more well-defined goals. Furthermore, these are 'seen' as coherent regions by France; in contrast, the first official publication focusing on the Black Sea as a separate region was published in 2020 (by the Ministry of Defence). In the next section, we will therefore look at how these other objectives influence France's actions in the Black Sea region, and where these objectives come from.

III MAIN DETERMINANTS OF FRENCH BLACK SEA POLICY

If France's actions in the Black Sea are not guided by a strategy specific to that region, what are the factors that guide and orient its relationships with the countries that we have examined in this report? In the previous section, we saw that French policies vis-à-vis different countries were 'linked' with various broader policy goals; in this section, we will first attempt to describe these goals more exhaustively. We will then attempt to characterise what the main determinants of these goals are, trying to identify which factors have explanatory value with regards to France's Black Sea policies.

Goals

From our overview of France's bilateral relations with Black Sea countries, we can identify at least three goals that French policy is pursuing in the region.

In the first place, one of the main objectives was to contribute to the peaceful resolution of post-Soviet conflicts, and, failing that, to stabilise these conflicts so they would remain 'frozen'. We can see this first of all in its policy in relation to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict: despite much deeper cultural ties to Armenia, until 2022, France stayed in its role as co-president of the Minsk group and mediator by not favouring either side in the conflict. Indeed, it sought to observe parity in weapon sales to the

⁴³ Communication from the Commission to the Council and the European Parliament: Black Sea synergy - A new regional cooperation initiative.

two sides and developed close ties to Azerbaijan, both culturally and in relation to oil and gas, while strengthening its already-existing economic and cultural ties to Armenia. It adopted a similar attitude in its mediation of the Russo-Georgian war in 2008. Indeed, the brokered ceasefire did not challenge the Russian presence in the occupied territories while ensuring that Georgia did not become a rump state completely dependent on Russian goodwill. This aimed at stabilising the conflict by recognising Moscow's interest in the territories and forcing Georgia to negotiate by making it clear European support for an armed conflict was not forthcoming – a plan that fell apart only two months later when Russia recognised the occupied regions as independent states. Finally, its approach to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict also aimed at stabilisation and avoiding any 'rocking of the boat', hence the veto over granting it an MAP. In 2014, while Paris supported the EU's sanctions policy, the main thrust of its involvement in the Normandy Group was still trying to stabilise the conflict in order to "prevent an impasse" in EU-Russia relations.

The second goal, closely related to the first one, was to achieve a stable entente between the European Union and Russia. Already before the first major NATO enlargement in 1999, France had proposed "concluding an agreement with Russia before taking a decision on including the Central and Eastern European countries in NATO", and it was later one of the main supporters of the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council.⁴⁴ It also went to some lengths to build up a good relationship with the Kremlin, both by encouraging foreign investment and by concluding an arms deal with it even after the 2008 war. Indeed, it has been argued that France's credit with Russia as a more 'neutral' European state helped its credibility as a mediator between Moscow and Tbilisi.⁴⁵ Furthermore, an entente with Russia, as we have seen, was widely considered the key to any resolution of the remaining conflicts in Eastern Europe. This attitude only began to change after 2014, with France's support of the sanctions, despite domestic opposition (the National Assembly voted in favour of a resolution supporting a lifting of the sanctions in 2016).⁴⁶ However, even then, the main objective of its Russia policy remained the stabilisation of the conflict, rather than direct support for Ukraine. The importance of Russia for French foreign policy can be judged by the fact that while the relationship with Turkey, the other major player in the region, was 'sacrificed' for largely domestic political reasons (in relation to the Armenian genocide and its EU accession) in the early 2000s, the relationship with Russia was much less influenced by domestic factors.

Thirdly, the last goal was to strengthen France's bilateral defence cooperation with other European countries. The main partner for this policy in the Black Sea region is Romania, where longstanding defence cooperation has resulted in an agreement for the deployment of a French battalion in Cincu, in the north of the country.⁴⁷ In the past few years, Greece has become one of Paris' main partners in this area, due to their shared interests in the eastern Mediterranean. This should be seen as part of France's broader and longstanding commitment to a European defence policy independent from NATO. Indeed, the Franco-Greek bilateral defence agreement pointedly has priority over the two countries' NATO commitments.

44 Rieker, *French Foreign Policy in a Changing World*, 68–69.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, 76.

47 Vincent, 'A Cincu, en Roumanie, l'armée française finalise sa principale base sur le flanc est de l'Europe, où 750 soldats sont déployés.'

Origins of the policy

Where do these goals originate? In this section, we will argue that the most important of French foreign policy in the Black Sea are historical rather than economic or domestic.

Let us start with the historical origins. As has already been mentioned, French relations with Russia have a long history. However, this is not the most important factor in order to explain the French approach to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Instead, this can be better explained by using the concept of ‘Gaullo-Mitterrandism’, referring to the broad foreign policy line pursued by the two long-serving presidents of post-war France. It is defined as the idea that “France has a specific role to play” which is “only possible if France is independent of a system of entrenched alliances”, and that it is therefore “allied but not necessarily aligned”.⁴⁸ In other words, it seeks to create space for a foreign policy that is less dependent on the US than other NATO countries, while remaining aligned with the Western bloc. While he does not use the term, David Cadier provides a useful summary of what this entails in his description of what he calls France’s “milieu goals”, i.e., the way it seeks to shape the international environment. We can broadly summarise them by saying that France seeks to maintain the stability of a European and international order which gives it outsize institutional influence (e.g., through its permanent seat at the UN Security Council) while strengthening the EU’s international position and its own leadership role within the bloc.

Table 1: France’s traditional milieu goals in international politics

<i>Type</i>	<i>International</i>	<i>Regional</i>
Systemic (distribution of power)	Europe as a strong actor in a multipolar world order	Europe as a coherent and independent actor; France’s leadership and autonomy in Europe
Normative (rules, norms and institutions)	Maintain post-1945 international order (UNSC, non-proliferation regime)	Maintain European security architecture (Paris Charter, Helsinki principles)

Understanding this broader goal clarifies why France acts as it does in the Black Sea region. Its engagement with Russia is seen as a way to seek to stabilise the European ‘neighbourhood’ so that the EU, no longer distracted and divided by crises on its periphery, will be able to become a more coherent and strong actor. Furthermore, finding an agreement with Russia would reduce the need for American involvement in Europe as either an external crisis-solver or a buffer against Russia, thus potentially increasing European autonomy. The building up of strong bilateral defence relationships

48 Boniface, ‘Why the concept of Gaullo-Mitterrandism is still relevant’.

with EU countries, meanwhile, is meant to increase intra-European cohesion on defence issues and thus make the EU less dependent on NATO.

By comparison, economic interests are much less prominent than milieu goals as an important factor influencing French policy in the region. Firstly, as we have seen, while France has strong economic relationships with most of the countries examined, there is no country which is dependent on it economically and no country on which it depends. It is the 9th-largest exporter to Ukraine, 6th-largest to Russia, 12th-largest to Georgia, 7th-largest to Turkey, 7th-largest to Romania, etc, and while it is an important export destination for Bucharest, it is much less economically integrated with any of these countries than Germany or Italy.⁴⁹ In addition to this, while it does import gas and oil from Russia and Azerbaijan, it does not do so in high volumes due to its lower energy dependency compared to other large EU countries,⁵⁰ and because its main supplier of gas has been Norway since the mid-2000s.⁵¹ Thus, it does not have the same energy relationship with Moscow and Baku that Germany and Italy do, respectively. Where France does have important economic ties with these countries is as a foreign investor. However, its most important such relationship, with Russia, started developing in the early 21st century, when the French relationship with Moscow was already on the path it would stay on until 2014. If anything, Paris' eventual agreement to the sanctions show that economic interests did not play much of a role in decision-making.

Turning to domestic policy, we have already seen some instances in which it has played a role. Notably, in relations with Turkey, which were “constantly instrumentalised for domestic-policy reasons”.⁵² However, this is the only case in the region where domestic-policy issues have proven to be a significant factor in French foreign policy. As we saw, domestic resistance to the European sanctions on Russia did not prevent French re-approval of them in Brussels. Furthermore, strong pro-Armenian sentiment did nothing to change France's position on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, even during the second war in 2020, after which the parliament voted to recognise Karabakh's independence. Instead, the French position started to become much more pro-Armenian after the Russian invasion of Ukraine – in reaction to geopolitical shifts rather than public opinion. The only other case where relations with Black Sea countries were impacted by domestic politics is in France's longstanding (although now lifted) veto to Romania and Bulgaria joining the Schengen area.⁵³ We can therefore see that domestic politics has a significant influence only when a strongly politicised issue is on the line – in both cases, immigration. Furthermore, both issues were related to the EU; at the current level of integration, European policy can more accurately be seen as half-way between domestic and foreign policy. However, it does not have any real influence on less politicised issues, and despite the parliament trying to exert its influence, the executive remains largely in control.

In conclusion, French foreign policy in the Black Sea region is primarily driven by its broader goals related to the international environment, i.e., maintaining stability in its neighbourhood to strengthen the EU's autonomy and its leadership role within the bloc. Domestic considerations do play a role, but only when the issue at hand is strongly linked to domestic policy; economic considerations, meanwhile, are much less important.

49 Data from <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/tresor-international>.

50 Eurostat, 'EU Energy Mix and Import Dependency'.

51 Commissariat général au développement durable, 'Gaz naturel'.

52 Billion, 'France - Turquie : Entre Tensions et Normalisations... De La Difficulté de Parvenir à Une Relation Apaisée', 72.

53 Reuters, 'France against Romania, Bulgaria Joining Schengen Zone'.

IV THE FUTURE OF FRENCH BLACK SEA POLICY

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, French policy in the region has shifted significantly. It is easy to see why: the goals that were the driving force behind its policy up to then no longer seem realistic in the near and medium-term. Any chance at stability was destroyed on February 24th, which also made an agreement between the EU and Russia inconceivable. French policy therefore radically shifted to become much more supportive of Ukraine. Indeed, it supported the unprecedented economic sanctions against Russia – with finance minister Bruno Le Maire even declaring that “we will bring about the collapse of the Russian economy”⁵⁴ – and contributed to Western military aid to Ukraine, notably by delivering CAESAR self-propelled howitzers. Its military support has not been as extensive as other large EU countries’: up to November 20, it amounted to 500 million euro, compared to 1.8 billion euro for Poland and 2.3 billion euro for Germany.⁵⁵ However, if France’s share of EU aid is taken into account, its total commitment is still the third highest among Western countries, amounting to 7.39 billion euro.⁵⁶ In addition to this shift on Ukraine policy, France also started supporting Armenia more actively in its conflict with Azerbaijan, leading to repeated spats with the latter.⁵⁷

There are still important continuities with its pre-invasion policy, however. This is notably shown by Macron’s repeated statements that Russia should not be “humiliated”⁵⁸ or that security guarantees will need to be offered to Russia in eventual peace talks.⁵⁹ Despite realising that an agreement with Russia was now impossible in the foreseeable future, the idea that a long-term agreement satisfying both Russia and the rest of the continent is necessary still persists, and France thus opposes imposing a “Carthaginian peace” on Russia if it is defeated. We can therefore see that the invasion of Ukraine has not overturned the long-term objectives of French foreign policy, in the Black Sea or in other regions. However, we have seen that it has already led to significant changes in its attitude toward Ukraine and Armenia; it is therefore not unlikely that there may be other important changes in its bilateral relationships with Black Sea countries in the near future.

54 RFI, ‘Former Russian President Calls out French Finance Chief over Economic War Claim’.

55 Bushnell et al., ‘Ukraine Support Tracker’. This does not therefore include the recently announced tank deliveries.

56 Ibid.

57 Kucera, ‘UN Security Council Opts Not to Issue Statement on Karabakh Blockade’.

58 Reuters, ‘Russia Must Not Be Humiliated despite Putin’s “historic” Mistake, Macron Says’.

59 Cohen, ‘Security Guarantees for Russia Are an “Essential” Part of Any Peace Talks, Macron Says’.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, it is difficult to discern any specific and coherent French strategy vis-à-vis the Black Sea region. Instead, France's actions in the region are coherent with its wider European milieu goals, notably strengthening both the EU and its own position within it. By force of circumstance, its policy has gradually evolved since 2014 and especially after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February. However, for now, the foundation of its policies remains unchanged.

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