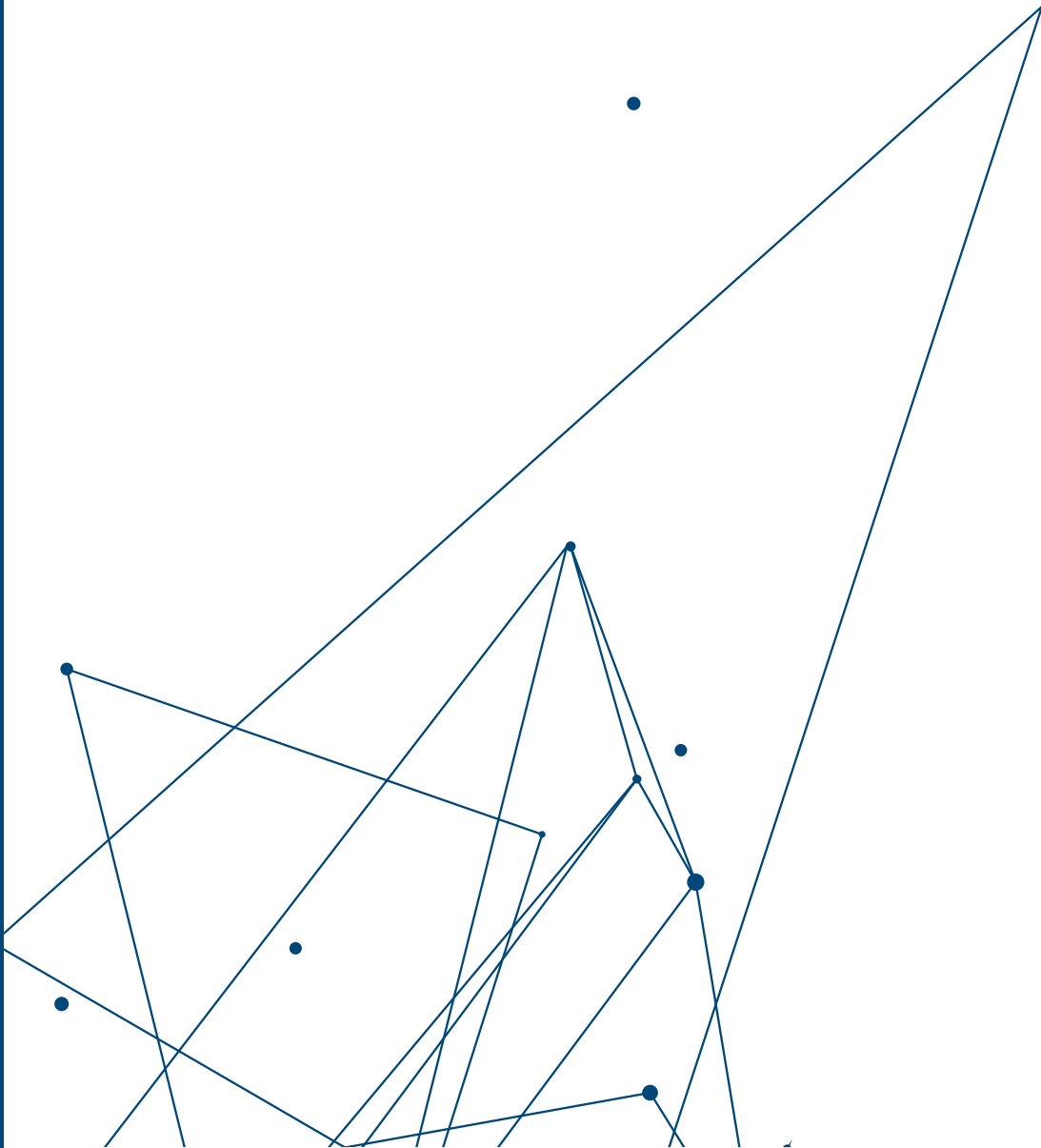


French Perceptions of European Defence and Türkiye's Role

From Ally to Strategic Competitor?

Nicolas Monceau



French President Emmanuel Macron has been calling since 2017 for a relaunch of the European debate on strategic autonomy – in response to Brexit, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and persistent doubts about Washington’s commitment to NATO – and has positioned France to play a leading role. The debate about Türkiye’s role in a new European security architecture, in particular in the framework of Türkiye’s membership of NATO, is particularly salient for France as the two countries share a long record of close economic, political and cultural ties. However, the past ten years (and Macron’s presidency in particular) have seen a succession of crises and tensions in bilateral relations. These have led to a shift in the French perception of Türkiye, from an ally to a strategic competitor. As a consequence, even if the tension seems to have lessened recently, there has been little or no discussion in France about Türkiye’s potential role in the European security architecture.

This paper is part of a CATS Network Papers series exploring the role of Turkey in a future European security order, particularly in light of the EU’s ongoing challenges, first and foremost the war in Ukraine. As part of this series, CATS has commissioned nine country reports on several EU member states, as well as on Ukraine and Turkey, with the aim of identifying both the opportunities and the challenges for enhanced cooperation between Turkey and the EU within an evolving security order.

Nicolas Monceau is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Bordeaux. His research focuses on Turkish politics, particularly EU–Turkey relations, domestic politics in Turkey and Turkish neighbourhood politics as an emerging regional power.

Table of Contents

1.	France as a Leading Country in the “Strategic Autonomy” of European Security and Defence	4
1.1	Perceptions of Risks and Threats in France and Europe	4
1.2	France’s Position on European Defence	6
1.2.1	Old and New French Positions on European Defence	6
1.2.2	France’s Official Views on European Defence Under Macron Since 2017	7
1.3	Reactions to President Macron’s Statements on European Defence	10
1.3.1	International Reactions	10
1.3.2	Domestic Reactions	11
2.	France’s Relations with Türkiye in the Realms of Security and Defence	17
2.1	History of Security and Defence Cooperation Between France and Türkiye	17
2.2	Cooperation and Rivalry in Bilateral Relations	19
2.2.1	Cooperation and Rivalry in the Arms Trade	19
2.2.2	Cooperation and Rivalry in the Political and Security Spheres	24
2.3	French Perceptions of Türkiye: Ally, Rival or Threat?	30
2.3.1	Popular Perceptions: The French People Against Türkiye?	31
2.3.2	Political and Security Perceptions of Türkiye: From Valuable Ally to Strategic Competitor	32
3.	Conclusions and Policy Recommendations: How to Overcome Distrust and Bilateral Tensions?	37
	Abbreviations	40

1.

France as a Leading Country in the “Strategic Autonomy” of European Security and Defence

France’s positions on European strategic autonomy are based on an assessment of the risks and threats faced by France and Europe, along with President Macron’s discourses and initiatives promoting France as a leading country in the debate on European defence.

1.1

Perceptions of Risks and Threats in France and Europe

The threats and risks outlined in the 2013 *French White Paper on Defence and National Security* materialised more rapidly and extensively than expected. The 2017 Strategic Review and 2021 and 2022 updates identify three main threats that require action. Firstly, terrorism remains the most direct threat, with the risk of a jihadist resurgence in the Middle East due to dispersion of foreign jihadists from the Levant, continued marginalisation of Sunni populations, and Sunni-Shia tensions. The 2021 strategic update classed the threat of militant jihadism as elevated and likely to increase. Secondly, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is regarded as growing threat, with a real possibility of the use of chemical and biological agents, potentially even within France itself. In the nuclear field, Paris also emphasises certain states’ adoption of opaque nuclear postures that appear increasingly at odds with the classic codes of deterrence (potentially involving intimidation, blackmail or escalation). Finally, the third threat is the return of strategic and military competition with major powers such as Russia and China, also involving non-military resources and increasingly systematic use of hybrid strategies. Contestation of the international

order has led to multi-dimensional competition between the international powers extending to all domains of confrontation. The 2022 National Strategic Review noted that latent competition had shifted to open confrontation with Russia and, increasingly, greater competition with China.

Paris also identified two vulnerabilities: Firstly energy, where France and Europe are increasingly dependent on countries outside Europe for their gas supplies. As well as Middle Eastern suppliers these also include Russia, the United States and Türkiye. And secondly the intense interconnection of the globalised world, which enables the rapid spread of viruses (as during the Covid-19 pandemic) and complicates responses to health crises. Risks related to the globalisation of production and the effects of health-related dependency (especially on China) were also emphasised, as was the need to strengthen the mechanisms for international cooperation.

The French defence ministry's perception of risks and threats in the regions surrounding Europe highlights the centrality of Europe's southern neighbourhood for French foreign and security policy. In the European periphery – in countries and areas such as the Sahel, Libya, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan – facing instability and violence for decades, the Mediterranean region is considered a central security issue due to factors including the Arab uprisings of 2011, subsequent civil wars and state collapse in Syria and Libya, and political and socio-economic fragility in the Levant, the Maghreb and sub-Saharan and eastern Africa. These developments have facilitated a sharp increase in illegal migration to Europe as well as the rise of criminal activity (trafficking in drugs, arms and people, money laundering, tax havens, and oil smuggling, especially from Libya). Irregular migration is seen as a potential risk due to new transit routes that could potentially lead to a rapid and massive resumption of migrant flows.¹

¹ Ministry of Armed Forces of France, *French White Paper on Defence and National Security – 2013* (Paris, July 2013), https://otan.delegfrance.org/IMG/pdf/White_paper_on_defense_2013.pdf?572/67a412fbf01faadf4bbac1e9126d2e32f03f0bco (accessed 20 November 2024); Ministry of Armed Forces of France, *Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017* (Paris, October 2017), https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/defense_and_national_security_strategic_review_2017.pdf (accessed 20 November 2024); Ministry of Armed Forces of France, *Strategic Update 2021* (Paris, 2021), https://cd-geneve.delegfrance.org/IMG/pdf/strategic_review_2021_-_10_key_points-3.pdf?2350/133c682f3374f15bc786c19b6b0a1d10eb0656f7 (accessed 20 November 2024); Ministry of Armed Forces of France, *National Strategic Review 2022* (Paris, 2022), <https://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2024).

1.2

France's Position on European Defence

France's positions on European defence are not new. They originate in General de Gaulle's policies in the 1960s. French President Emmanuel Macron has revitalised this project since 2017, calling publicly for shared European defence.

1.2.1

Old and New French Positions on European Defence

Since 2017, President Macron has promoted France's positions on European security and defence in several speeches and launched a range of initiatives. It should be noted that the official French position under Macron – of promoting autonomous European defence – is not new. It dates back to General de Gaulle's presidency in the 1960s and reflects the ambiguous French position throughout the Fifth Republic. The European Defence Community proposed in 1954 would have provided for the creation of a European army, but was stopped by the French National Assembly. Although de Gaulle opposed placing French forces under supranational NATO command, it was he who put European defence back on the agenda in the 1960s.

De Gaulle's conception of European defence was based on national sovereignty. On the one hand, France proposed the Fouchet Plans, which sought to establish a union of states based on strictly intergovernmental cooperation, with a common foreign and security policy. This project was rejected by France's European partners. On the other hand, de Gaulle pursued a policy of national independence, in particular vis-à-vis the United States. This led France to acquire its own nuclear weapons, and to withdraw from NATO's integrated military command in 1966. Subsequently, between the 1980s and 2000s, Presidents Mitterrand and Chirac encouraged a rapprochement with NATO by supporting the establishment of a European pillar within the organisation. At the time this was a priority for French foreign policy. Finally, France rejoined the integrated military command in 2009, following a decision by President Sarkozy.²

² Chantal Lavallée, "La défense européenne" [European defence], in *La France depuis de Gaulle: La Ve République en perspective* [France since de Gaulle: The Fifth Republic in perspective], eds. Marc Chevrier and Isabelle Gusse (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 23 January 2018): 285–309, <https://books.openedition.org/pum/8393?lang=fr#anchor-fulltext> (accessed 28 January 2025).

France's Official Views on European Defence Under Macron Since 2017

Building on France's unique position within the EU – as a declared nuclear power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council – President Macron has regularly stated his determination to build and strengthen a “powerful Europe”, with nuclear deterrence as its foundation. Since 2017, he has frequently returned to the concept of “strategic autonomy” as a goal to be achieved by European countries. Creating a European defence system is a long-standing French objective, often against the resistance of partners who prefer the NATO umbrella for their security. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the return of Donald Trump to office in January 2025 have rekindled the debate on European autonomy in defence matters.

Three presidential speeches on security and defence are particularly significant. On 26 September 2017, in a speech on Europe at the Sorbonne University, Macron called for “rebuilding a sovereign, united and democratic Europe”. “In the area of defence, our aim needs to be ensuring Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO.”³ The European context at the time was marked by the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU (Brexit) – which made France the only nuclear power within the EU – and Donald Trump's first Presidency, which placed the question of US withdrawal from NATO on the agenda again.

Macron gave another important speech on defence and deterrence at the École de Guerre in Paris on 7 February 2020. Recalling the four pillars of this strategy – promotion of efficient multilateralism, development of strategic partnerships, search for European autonomy, and national sovereignty – he emphasised that strategic stability in Europe required more than transatlantic convergence with the United States and that Europe's security thus depended on its ability to operate more autonomously. As a consequence, he was proposing the creation of a shared European strategic culture.⁴

Noting the threat raised by what he called “nuclear multi-polarity”, Macron proposed reviving the idea of “Europeanisation” of France's nuclear deterrent on the basis that France's vital interests now had a European dimension. Here, he called for a strategic dialogue with France's European partners on the role played by France's nuclear

³ Présidence de la République, “President Macron gives speech on new initiative for Europe”, Paris, 26 September 2017, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2017/09/26/president-macron-gives-speech-on-new-initiative-for-europe> (accessed 22 November 2024).

⁴ Présidence de la République, “Speech of the President of the Republic on the Defense and Deterrence Strategy”, Paris, 07 February 2020, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2020/02/07/speech-of-the-president-of-the-republic-on-the-defense-and-deterrence-strategy> (accessed 15 September 2024).

deterrence in Europe's collective security.⁵

Finally, in a speech on Europe at the Sorbonne in April 2024, Macron declared that “nuclear deterrence is, indeed, at the heart of French defence strategy. It is therefore an essential element in the defence of the European continent.” He called for a “new defence paradigm” to build a “strategic concept of a credible European defence” operating alongside NATO to counter Russia, and invited his European partners to identify “the relevant capabilities: anti-missiles, deep strikes, and all other useful capabilities”. He again mentioned the French doctrine of nuclear deterrence, stressing the European dimension of France's vital interests as a contribution to the credibility of European defence.⁶

In 2024 Macron made further statements in the same vein. In an interview with young Europeans on 27 April 2024, he said he was ready to “open the debate” on European defence, which should “include missile defence, long-range weapons, and nuclear weapons for those who possess them or who have American nuclear weapons on their soil”. He added that France retained “its special status, but was ready to contribute more to European defence”.⁷

In a statement on defence policy on 13 July 2024, Macron reiterated France's continuing support for Ukraine and its war economy, emphasising the necessity to “adjust” the defence budget in 2025 in order to cope with the “convergence of threats”, in particular the war in Ukraine and the situation in the Middle East.⁸ In this connection, the 2024–2030 Military Programming Act (Loi de programmation militaire - LPM) provides for a significant increase in the French military budget (by around 40 per cent), amounting to €413.3 billion during the coming seven years.⁹

Since 2017, France has also launched a series of initiatives designed to strengthen European security and defence. These have concentrated on creating and shaping the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Présidence de la République, “Europe speech”, Paris, 24 April 2024a, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech> (accessed 15 September 2024).

⁷ “Emmanuel Macron prêt à «ouvrir le débat» d'une défense européenne comprenant l'arme nucléaire” [Emmanuel Macron ready to “open the debate” on a European defence including nuclear weapons], *Le Monde* (online), 27 April 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2024/04/27/emmanuel-macron-pret-a-ouvrir-le-debat-d-une-defense-europeenne-comprenant-l-arme-nucleaire_6230320_3210.html (accessed 20 September 2024).

⁸ Vie publique, “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, président de la République, sur la politique de la défense, à Paris le 13 juillet 2024” [Statement by Mr Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on defence policy, in Paris on 13 July 2024], Paris, 13 July 2024, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/294867-emmanuel-macron-13072024-politique-de-la-defense> (accessed 15 September 2024).

⁹ Jean-François Auran, “Examining the French Military Programming Act 2024–2030”, *European Security & Defense (ESD)* (online), 30 January 2024, <https://euro-sd.com/2024/01/articles/36190/examining-the-french-military-programming-act-2024-2030/> (accessed 15 June 2024).

political and operational instruments Paris considers necessary for strengthening European security. The European Political Community (EPC) was established in 2021 at Macron's initiative to promote an agenda of peace and stability across Europe (including non-EU states) and foster the discussion of shared challenges such as energy, connectivity, infrastructure, security, migration and regional tensions. Five summits have been held to date, in Prague, Chisinau, Granada, Woodstock (UK) and Budapest (November 2024). They all focussed on the conflict in Ukraine, most notably in 2022. Other new financial and operational instruments include a European Defence Fund (EDF) and a European Peace Facility (EPF). The EDF is the Commission's instrument for promoting defence research and development. With a budget of nearly €8 billion for 2021–2027, it supports companies within the EU in developing competitive collaborative defence projects. The EPF is an off-budget funding mechanism under the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), which is used to fund EU actions with military and defence implications. It has a total budget of more than €17 billion for 2021–2027.

The Versailles Summit on 10 and 11 March 2022 – held under the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union – issued a declaration reaffirming the EU's support for Ukraine and outlining the EU's plans to bolster its own defence capabilities, reduce its energy dependency, build a more robust economic base, and foster investment. The declaration also emphasised the need for the EU to be stronger and more capable in the field of security and defence, in order to contribute positively to global and transatlantic security and to complement NATO.¹⁰

Following US Vice President JD Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025, President Macron hosted European leaders for an emergency summit on the Ukraine war in Paris on 18 February 2025. At the end of the talks, European leaders called for higher defence spending but remained divided on the possible deployment of peacekeepers to Ukraine.¹¹

¹⁰ European Council (EC), *Informal meeting of the Heads of State or Government: Versailles Declaration: 10 and 11 March 2022* (Versailles, 11 March 2022), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf> (accessed 25 January 2025).

¹¹ John Irish, "France's Macron to host emergency European summit on Ukraine", *Reuters* (online), 16 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/macron-host-european-leaders-meeting-ukraine-monday-says-french-minister-2025-02-16/> (accessed 17 February 2025); "European leaders' comments after emergency Ukraine talks in Paris", *Reuters* (online), 17 February 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/european-leaders-possibly-sending-peacekeepers-into-ukraine-2025-02-17/> (accessed 17 February 2025).

1.3

Reactions to President Macron's Statements on European Defence

Even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine, France was fostering Europeanisation of defence by establishing new political, financial and operational instruments. France's commitment to European defence and its efforts to promote it must be understood in the context of President Macron's views on NATO's changing role in European security and defence and recontextualised in the framework of the incoming Trump administration.

1.3.1

International Reactions

In an interview with *The Economist* in November 2019, President Macron said that NATO was suffering “brain death”. Strategic cooperation had ceased, he said, on a range of key issues and there had been a “glaring and unacceptable disconnect” at the last two NATO summits, which had wasted time talking about financial and technical matters instead of tackling the grave challenges the alliance currently faced. After a meeting with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg, Macron reiterated that “a wake-up call was necessary” in light of NATO's failure to address pressing challenges such as relations with Russia, the subject of Türkiye, or even the question “who is the enemy?” (including terrorism as a new priority, Macron said). In the same interview, Macron also called for a rapprochement with Russia, asked France's allies to step up their contributions to the fight against Islamic terrorism in the Sahel, and expressed his opposition to further EU enlargement.¹²

These statements were interpreted as a reaction to President Trump's unexpected order a month previously, to withdraw US forces from north-eastern Syria, which opened the way for the Turkish offensive against Syrian Kurdish forces (the People's Defence Units, YPG) in northern Syria. The EU considered the Turkish military intervention a violation of international law, and Macron urged Türkiye to end its offensive immediately, saying it risked boosting Islamic State (IS) extremists.¹³ Macron also criticised NATO's failure to respond to the Turkish offensive. This caught NATO allies unawares, and contributed to Macron's damning critique of the alliance. Macron's assertions, and what certain observers called “the Macron method”, drew

¹² “Macron defends ‘wake-up call’ for NATO after talks with chief”, *The Jordan Times* (online), 28 November 2019, <https://jordantimes.com/news/world/macron-defends-%E2%80%98wake-call%E2%80%99-nato-after-talks-chief> (accessed 16 April 2025).

¹³ “EU condemns Turkey's Syria offensive”, *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 14 October 2019; “Macron urges Turkey to end Syria offensive, warns risks aiding IS”, *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 10 October 2019.

sharp reactions within NATO and from European partners. German Chancellor Angela Merkel in particular said that she disagreed with Macron. Observers note that Macron's abrasive foreign policy style has caused consternation in Europe and risks backfiring.¹⁴

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Macron's positions on NATO shifted significantly. In May 2023, while acknowledged that he had once called the alliance "brain dead", he said that Russia's invasion "had jolted NATO awake". He called for "tangible and credible" NATO security guarantees for Kyiv, which would be in the West's interests as Ukraine was "protecting Europe". Ultimately, he said, the Russian invasion of Ukraine underlined the need to relaunch European defence. Macron again called on European countries to strengthen the Europeanisation of security and defence by buying European arms and acquiring long-range strike capabilities: "It is up to us Europeans to have our own ability to defend ourselves in the future", he said, adding: "A Europe of defence, a European pillar within NATO, is indispensable. It's the only way to be credible ... in the long-term."¹⁵

1.3.2

Domestic Reactions

1.3.2.1 The Political Elites

At the national level, Macron's speeches, statements and proposals have drawn sharp reactions across the political spectrum, in some cases transcending the traditional left-right cleavage. There are differences among the left-wing political parties over NATO's role. The French Socialist Party still sees NATO as an effective military tool ensuring a high level of interoperability between its member states' forces, whereas La France Insoumise (LFI) regularly calls for France to withdraw from NATO.¹⁶ The LFI also rejects Macron's "Europe of defence" on the grounds that it will encourage war in Europe without ensuring France's autonomy from the United States. In November 2024, LFI leader Jean-Luc Mélenchon criticised the establishment of a new Directorate-General (DG) for Defence and *Space* within the European Commission, saying it fostered a "Europe of war", and called instead for the establishment of a "DG for peace".¹⁷

During the 2024 European election campaign, the French Socialist Party and the centre-left Place Publique party called jointly for "rearmament of Europe" through a

¹⁴ "NATO brain dead? Macron's disruptive style rattles Europe", *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 27 November 2019.

¹⁵ "Macron urges 'tangible' NATO security guarantees for Kyiv", *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 31 May 2023.

¹⁶ La France Insoumise, *Proposition de loi pour que la France sorte de l'OTAN [Proposal of bill for France to leave NATO]* (Paris, 03 January 2022), <https://lafranceinsoumise.fr/niche-parlementaire-2022-de-la-france-insoumise/ppl-france-sort-otan/> (accessed 20 January 2025).

¹⁷ "Ukraine: Mélenchon fustige la nomination d'un commissaire européen pour la guerre" [Ukraine: Mélenchon criticises the appointment of a European commissioner for the war], *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 11 November 2024.

“European defence fund” of €100 billion financed by joint borrowing, and proposed a “Buy European Act” to ensure that European industries in strategic sectors, notably defence, benefit from European investments.¹⁸ The French Greens (Europe Ecology – The Greens, EELV) supported common security and defence to guarantee European strategic autonomy, including the creation of a European army and the development of a common political strategy. EELV also stressed the need to produce armaments in Europe to avoid “new toxic dependencies”.¹⁹

Renaissance, as the leading force in Macron’s centrist coalition, supported most of his positions. During the 2024 European election campaign its lead candidate, Valérie Hayer, defended financial, material and logistical assistance for Ukraine. She also supported the idea of a European army and called for states to rearm, with European investment of €100 billion funded in particular by the European Investment Bank. She also proposed that EU member states should increase their defence budgets to at least 2 per cent of GDP by 2025, rising to 3 per cent by 2030.²⁰

The Gaullist Republicans strongly criticised Macron’s proposals. In particular they denounced the prospect of European defence with French nuclear weapons as an “exceptionally worrying” proposal with implications for French sovereignty”.²¹

During the 2024 European election campaign the Republicans argued that European rearmament was a vital necessity, and that all EU member states – whether NATO members or not – should aim to spend 3 per cent of their GDP on defence. The party also proposed introducing a European industrial preference for the European Defence Fund (EDF) and the European Defence Agency, as well as tripling the EDF’s resources

¹⁸ Réveiller l’Europe, *Le programme Réveiller l’Europe [The waking up Europe programme]* (Paris, May 2024), <https://www.glucksmann2024.eu/programme> (accessed 25 January 2025); Valentin Ledroit, “Elections européennes 2024: le programme de Raphaël Glucksmann et de la liste Parti socialiste (PS)/Place publique (PP)” [European elections 2024: the programme of Raphaël Glucksmann and the Parti socialiste (PS)/Place publique (PP) list], *Toute l’Europe* (online), 24 May 2024, <https://www.touteleurope.eu/vie-politique-des-etats-membres/elections-europeennes-2024-le-programme-de-raphael-glucksmann-et-de-la-liste-parti-socialiste-ps-place-publique-pp/> (accessed 25 January 2025).

¹⁹ Europe Écologie Les Verts (EELV), *Notre socle programmatique: Sauver le climat et faire face à l’urgence sociale avec un Etat providence écologique européen [Our programme: Saving the climate and tackling the social emergency with a European ecological welfare state]*, <https://ecologie2024.eu/manifesto/QyPTqmI8c8CKLfCsigsIT/international> (accessed 25 January 2025).

²⁰ Lisa Boudoussier, “Elections européennes 2024: que disent les programmes sur l’Ukraine et la défense commune?” [European elections 2024: what do the programmes say about Ukraine and common defence?], *Libération* (online), 01 June 2024, https://www.liberation.fr/politique/europeennes-2024-que-disent-les-programmes-sur-lukraine-et-la-defense-commune-20240601_BKUTKBINKJEXFMDXJVFSCRZLQ/ (accessed 20 December 2024).

²¹ Mathieu Rosemain, “France’s nuclear weapons should be part of European defence debate, Macron says”, *Reuters* (online), 28 April 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/frances-nuclear-weapons-should-be-part-european-defence-debate-macron-says-2024-04-28/> (accessed 16 April 2025); “Défense européenne: Macron sous le feu des critiques après ses propos sur la dissuasion nucléaire” [European defence: Macron under fire after comments on nuclear deterrence], *Agence France-Presse* (AFP), 28 April 2024.

in the next budget period (from €8 to 25 billion). Finally, it proposed providing more resources for the European Union's military staff in order to create a permanent operations centre and a "European pillar" within NATO.²²

The far-right National Rally criticised the creation of the European Defence Fund, arguing that defence should remain a national prerogative.²³ During the 2024 European election campaign, the party and its lead candidate, Jordan Bardella, advocated for a Europe that respects national sovereignty, particularly in the field of defence, and rejected the idea of Ukraine joining the EU. They encouraged the procurement of European arms and equipment, in order to decrease European dependency on the United States, and called for Europe to produce its own arms where possible.²⁴

1.3.2.2 French Public Opinion on Security in Europe: The War in Ukraine and the Common Defence Policies

National and European opinion polls provide insights into the French public's views on security and defence issues, in particular in relation to the war in Ukraine. Most available surveys show real concern about the war.

According to the Eurobarometer polling carried out in spring 2024, a majority of French citizens were concerned about the war in Ukraine: 77 per cent agreed that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was a threat to the security of the EU, and 71 per cent agreed that it was a threat to the security of their own country.²⁵

Another survey on "Concerns and perceptions of EU citizens", conducted across the twenty-seven EU member states in April 2024, found that a majority of French respondents were aware of the war and its consequences, and felt afraid that war could spread into Europe. 62 per cent agreed with the statement "Today, I fear the threat of imminent war with Russia in Europe" (EU: 62 per cent). French respondents tended to agree that Europe should strengthen its common policy on defence (72%,

²² Les Républicains, "Déplacement défense au sein de l'entreprise ARQUUS à Garchizy (Nièvre) de François-Xavier Bellamy, de Céline Imart et du Général Christophe Gomart" [Defence visit to the ARQUUS company in Garchizy (Nièvre) by François-Xavier Bellamy, Céline Imart, and General Christophe Gomart], Press release (Paris, 25 March 2024), <https://republicains.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2024-03-25-IR-dossier-presse-defense.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2025).

²³ Rassemblement National, "Marine Le Pen: L'Union européenne fait des choix désastreux en matière de Défense" [Marine Le Pen: The European Union is making disastrous choices on defence], Press release (Paris, 25 May 2018), <https://rassemblementnational.fr/communiqués/lunion-europeenne-fait-des-choix-désastreux-en-matiere-de-defense> (accessed 15 February 2025).

²⁴ Rassemblement National, *La France revient: L'Europe revit! Notre projet pour une Europe des nations* [France returns: Europe revives! Our project for a Europe of nations] (Paris, 09 June 2024), <https://vivementle9juin.fr/storage/Programme.pdf> (accessed 15 February 2025); Lisa Boudoussier, 2024.

²⁵ European Commission (EC), "Annex: Standard Eurobarometer 101, Spring 2024", Press release (Brussels, 23 May 2024), [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/878613/Annex%20-%20Standard%20EB%20101%20\(EN\).pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/api/files/attachment/878613/Annex%20-%20Standard%20EB%20101%20(EN).pdf) (accessed 15 October 2024).

EU27 also 72%) and immigration (66%), and support an European army comprising all member states (59%, EU27 also 59%).

36 per cent of respondents thought that Europe had sufficient military equipment to defend itself in the event of military aggression (EU: 30%). France is one of the countries with comparably higher approval rates for this statement (along with Luxembourg on 44%, Spain 38%, Croatia 36%, Greece 36%). 47 per cent agreed that the EU should increase its military aid to Ukraine (arms, tanks) (EU: 45%), while only 20 per cent were in favour of sending armed forces to Ukraine (EU: 22%). 56 per cent supported Ukraine joining the EU (EU: 63%). At the same time, only 27 per cent of French respondents (compared to 38% for Europe as a whole) named the war as one of the three biggest issues, behind purchasing power (40%) and health (37%). Terrorism was also a concern for French respondents (25% against 16% across the EU27).²⁶

In terms of perceived risk, a survey carried out in 2022 found that half of the French respondents thought that the war in Ukraine posed a serious or moderate risk to France (51%) and the world (67%). This was less than the overall figure across the countries where the survey was conducted, where 61 per cent felt that the war posed a notable risk to their own country and 82 per cent felt it posed a risk for the world. 68 per cent agreed that “doing nothing in Ukraine will encourage Russia to take further military action elsewhere in Europe and Asia” – which is the official French position.²⁷

According to the same survey, French respondents were more eager for their country to support Ukraine militarily than the European average. 53 per cent of French respondents thought that France should provide as guns and anti-tank weapons to the Ukrainian military (36% for the EU27), 48 per cent thought that France should provide funding to the Ukrainian military (33%), 55 per cent thought that France should send troops to NATO countries neighbouring Ukraine (32%) and 20 per cent thought that France should send troops to Ukraine (17%).

At a national level, opinion surveys show more balanced results. The war in Ukraine seems to concern French people less than other issues. A national survey conducted in May 2024, in the run-up to the European elections, asked respondents to rank the EU's priorities for the coming years. The war in Ukraine came only tenth (16% of

²⁶ The overall survey sample comprised 22,726 respondents. It was broken down into representative samples from each of the EU27 countries. The respondents were aged 15 and over (16+ for Luxembourg). BVA Xsight, *Concerns and perceptions of EU citizens* (Paris, April 2024), <https://www.bva-xsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Concerns-and-global-perception-of-the-EU-citizens-250424.pdf> (accessed 15 December 2024).

²⁷ The survey sample was composed of 19,000 online adults under the age of 75 across 27 countries. IPSOS SA, *The World's Response to the War in Ukraine: A 27-country Global Advisor survey* (Paris, April 2022), <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2022-04/Global%20Advisor%20-%20War%20in%20Ukraine%20-%20April%202022%20-%20Graphic%20Report.pdf> (accessed 15 October 2024).

respondents; multiple responses permitted). Only 33 per cent supported opening EU accession negotiations for Ukraine and Moldova, while 40 per cent opposed the idea.²⁸ However, 53 per cent of respondents were in favour of coordinating humanitarian, financial and military aid to Ukraine (26% opposed).

Concerning the European common defence, most of the surveys carried out in France show again balanced results. A majority of French respondents support common defence, but do not perceive it as a priority for their country. In the May 2024 survey cited above, establishing a European common defence ranked only eighth in the list of priorities for the EU in the coming years (22% of respondents). In an earlier survey carried out in March 2022, when France held the Presidency of the Council of the EU, almost half of the French respondents (48%) agreed that European defence policy was as a priority at European level.²⁹

A couple of months earlier, in December 2021 (and thus before Russia's invasion, a survey found that "Defending the security of the French people against external powers" ranked only fifth in respondents' priorities for France's foreign policy (32% of French respondents). Nearly half the respondents in that survey believed that France should spend more on intelligence (48%) and defence (44%) to strengthen its influence in the world. At the same time, nearly three-quarters of respondents were in favour of a common defence system for European countries, i.e., a collective strategy and a common army (74%, including 28% "strongly in favour"). 44 per cent said that France should speak directly to all international players, including those that are not allies (such as Russia, China and authoritarian countries).³⁰ French opinions about common European defence have changed little since the late 2000s. A survey in 2008 found that nearly three-quarters of French respondents supported the idea of a common military defence for the EU (73%).³¹

In conclusion, the French opinion polls as a whole show that the French people are concerned about the war in Ukraine and aware of the centrality of security and defence in Europe. However, the stability of French support for a common European defence

²⁸ IPSOS SA, *Les Français et les élections européennes* [The French and the European elections], survey for France Télévisions (Paris, 23 May 2024), <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-05/Ipsos-FTV-les-francais-et-les-elections-europeennes-mai-2024.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2024).

²⁹ Harris Interactive, *Observatoire de la présidence française de l'Union européenne (PFUE)* [Observatory of the French Presidency of the European Union (PFUE)], Vague 2, survey for Commstrat (March 2022), <https://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2022/03/Rapport-Harris-Observatoire-de-la-PFUE-Vague-3-Commstrat.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2024).

³⁰ Harris Interactive, *Les Français et la politique étrangère de la France* [The French and French foreign policy], survey for MGH Partners (December 2021), <https://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2022/01/Rapport-Harris-Les-Francais-et-la-politique-etrangere-de-la-France-MGH.pdf> (accessed 20 September 2024).

³¹ Harris Interactive, France 24 and International Herald Tribune, *Is NATO known/recognised? What's threatening the big western nations? What's an acceptable defense strategy?* (Paris, 28 March 2008), http://harris-interactive.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2015/09/HI_FR_Nato_synthese_28mar08_UK.pdf (20 September 2024).

over the past fifteen years (as shown by the survey findings from 2008 and 2024) raises questions about the impact of the official French position (in particular the French President's speeches) since 2017 on French opinion.

2.

France's Relations with Türkiye in the Realms of Security and Defence

France and Türkiye have developed security and defence relations for centuries. In the last decades, however, they have faced both cooperation and rivalry/competition in the fields of security and defence.

2.1

History of Security and Defence Cooperation Between France and Türkiye

Bilateral relations in the military field began during the Ottoman period, when French experts assisted with the modernisation of Ottoman military. Deliveries of French military equipment continued after the establishment of the Republic of Türkiye, in particular thanks to the Franco-Turkish agreement of January 1940.³² Increasing numbers of bilateral agreements in the fields of security and defence were signed from the 1980s onwards.

French-Turkish cooperation between the interior ministry security forces was initiated through a general cooperation agreement signed in 1968 and the France-Türkiye 2000 action plan adopted on 20 February 1998. Due to the increase in criminal cases involving French and Turkish services, an Internal Security Service (SSI) was established within the French Embassy in Ankara in March 1999.

³² Patrice Moyeuve, *Les relations franco-turques dans le domaine de l'armement* [Franco-Turkish relations in the field of armaments] (Paris: Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques [IRIS], February 2021), <https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Obs-Turquie-PMoyeuve-f%C3%A9vrier-2021.pdf> (accessed 15 September 2024).

The Framework Agreement between the Turkish and French governments on military and defence cooperation, signed in Paris on 13 January 2000, is a key document. It aimed to establish and develop military and defence cooperation between the two countries (three branches of the armed forces, national gendarmerie), and provided for the creation of a High Committee for Defence Cooperation to coordinate Franco-Turkish military and defence cooperation, with annual plenary sessions held alternately in France and Turkey. The two countries' membership of NATO also facilitated relations between them, and led to the adoption of common standards and procedures.

On 7 October 2011, after thirteen years of negotiations, France and Türkiye signed an agreement on cooperation on internal security, which provided for “operational cooperation in the fight against terrorism”. Bilateral cooperation in this area increased in the following years, due to the Syrian conflict and its consequences. However, the agreement did not provide any definition of terrorism. The main purpose of the agreement was to formalise the already regular exchanges between the various police services, covering working methods, crime-fighting strategies, crime statistics and exchanges of best practice.

The agreement was presented to the French National Assembly as a draft bill in 2012 but was not voted on. In May 2017, the foreign ministry published a study assessing the cooperation agreement.³³ It found that there was a real technical and operational cooperation between the two countries, although there was room for improvement. Cooperation focussed on three main areas: the fight against terrorism, including Islamist terrorism (Türkiye was a major transit hub for jihadists travelling to and from Afghanistan and Iraq; the fight against drug trafficking (Türkiye was a hub for opium and heroin trafficking from Afghanistan and Pakistan via Iran and Iraq); and the fight against illegal immigration (according to the FRONTEX (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) annual report for 2010, 75 per cent of illegal immigrants in the EU arrived via Türkiye).

In the field of security cooperation, France and Türkiye have been working together in several areas of shared interest, in particular in the fight against terrorism. In the 1980s and 1990s, cooperation was sometimes limited or hampered by Turkish criticisms of France's perceived support for the PKK (even if France classified the PKK as a terrorist group).³⁴ The French position on suspending Türkiye's EU accession

³³ Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, *Projet de loi autorisant l'approbation de l'accord de coopération dans le domaine de la sécurité intérieure entre le Gouvernement de la République française et le Gouvernement de la République de Turquie* [Draft bill authorising the approval of the cooperation agreement in the field of internal security between the Government of the French Republic and the Government of the Republic of Turkey], Etude d'impact, NOR : MAEJ1208715L/Bleue-1 (Paris, 10 May 2017), <https://www.senat.fr/leg/etudes-impact/pjl16-551-ei/pjl16-551-ei.pdf> (accessed 20 October 2024).

³⁴ An incident that occurred in the French Senate in March 2023 gives an indication of the diverging perceptions of the Kurdish issue in France and Türkiye. On 24 March 2023, the vice-president of the French Senate, Pierre Laurent (Communist Party), welcomed a delegation from the Autonomous

talks (in particular under the Sarkozy presidency in 2007–2012) and opposing views on the Armenian genocide caused bilateral tensions until 2013. After France publicly recognized the Armenian genocide of 1915 in legislation passed on 29 January 2001, Türkiye cancelled several military contracts with France.³⁵ Türkiye again suspended political and military cooperation with France after the French National Assembly passed legislation in December 2011 criminalising the denial of genocides recognised by France, including the Armenian genocide of 1915 (the bill was annulled in 2012 by the French Constitutional Council).³⁶

2.2

Cooperation and Rivalry in Bilateral Relations

Cooperation and rivalry between France and Türkiye are observed in the arms trade and at the political level.

2.2.1

Cooperation and Rivalry in the Arms Trade

Although French companies have signed numerous military contracts with Türkiye over the past thirty years, the export volume remains comparably low. Türkiye ranked 26th in the list of French arms export destinations, with contracts worth €594.5 million over the ten years between 2009 and 2019. Conversely, France only ranked 13th in Turkish arms imports, with 0.28 per cent of their total (\$23 million between

Administration of North and East Syria, which included representatives of Syrian Kurdish organisations (YPG), to discuss the situation in Rojava. This visit to the French Senate provoked outrage in the Turkish media, which accused the French Senate of “hosting a delegation from the PKK/YPG terrorist organisation”.

Ümit Dönmez, “Accueil des terroristes YPG au Sénat français: le Quai d’Orsay met en avant la séparation des pouvoirs” [YPG terrorists welcomed to the French Senate: the Quai d’Orsay highlights the separation of powers], *Anadolu Ajansı (AA)* (online), 30 March 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/monde/accueil-des-terroristes-ypg-au-s%C3%A9nat-francais-le-quai-dorsay-met-en-avant-la-s%C3%A9paration-des-pouvoirs/2859692> (accessed 15 December 2024).

³⁵ After the vote in the French National Assembly, the Turkish authorities cancelled a US\$200 million contract with Alcatel to build a spy satellite, and announced that they were re-evaluating other arms contracts with France.

Jean-Pierre Neu, “La Turquie annule un contrat d’équipement militaire avec Alcatel”, *Les Echos* (online), 24 January 2001, <https://www.lesechos.fr/2001/01/la-turquie-annule-un-contrat-dequipement-militaire-avec-alcatel-708218> (accessed 16 April 2025).

³⁶ In December 2011, Ankara immediately recalled its ambassador from Paris, suspended all political visits and froze all joint military activities including exercises. Erdoğan, at the time prime minister, said that Türkiye would consider any French request to use Turkish airspace or military bases on a case-by-case basis, and would reject any French request for military vessels to dock at Turkish ports. Burak Akinci, “Türkiye cuts some ties with ‘racist’ France over genocide law”, *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 22 December 2011.

2008 and 2018) behind the United States (45.8%), South Korea (12.1%), Germany (9.3%) and others. Several European countries exported larger volumes of arms to Türkiye than France during this period. As well as Germany, these included Italy (9.1%), Spain (8.7%), the Netherlands (3.2%) and the United Kingdom (0.9%).³⁷ Another angle is provided by the reports to the French parliament on France's arms exports. The detailed breakdown of military exports between 2013 and 2022 shows that Türkiye purchased military equipment worth €473.4 million from France during that period. By comparison, France's total arms exports during the same period were worth €67.9 billion. France's biggest clients were India (€11.9 billion), Saudi Arabia (€8.7 billion), Egypt (€7.1 billion) and Qatar (7.0 billion).³⁸

Among examples of French-Turkish cooperation in the realm of arms industry, the French aerospace and defence company Aérospatiale played a significant role in the efforts that led to that aircraft (A400M air lifter), with Türkiye committing in the late 1990s to acquire ten A400Ms. More recently, in 2015 Türkiye began negotiations with the French-Italian Eurosam consortium to purchase SAMP-T medium-range man-portable air defence systems, and in November 2017 signed a declaration of intent with Italy and France to strengthen cooperation on production of air and missile defence systems.³⁹ A contract with Eurosam for the Long-Range Air and Missile Defence Project was signed in January 2018, during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to France.⁴⁰ In the end, according to Turkish sources, France blocked the deal in January 2020 in response to Turkish intervention in Syria.⁴¹ In March 2022, on the sidelines of an extraordinary NATO Summit in Brussels, the Turkish and Italian leaders said that they were willing to revive cooperation between Türkiye, France and Italy. The factors behind this attempt to relaunch the trilateral cooperation include the very recent Russian invasion of Ukraine, which made Turkey indispensable for regional security, as well as the upcoming April 2022 French elections and Türkiye's

³⁷ Patrice Moyeuve, 2021.

³⁸ Ministère des Armées, *Rapport au Parlement sur les exportations d'armement de la France: 2023* [Report to Parliament on French arms exports: 2023] (Paris, July 2023), <https://www.defense.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/ministere-armees/Rapport%20au%20Parlement%202023%20sur%20les%20exportations%20d%E2%80%99armement%20de%20la%20France%20%2807%202023%29.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2024): 108-111.

³⁹ Eurosam, "Turkey, France and Italy sign an agreement on air defense", Press release (09 November 2017), <https://eurosam.com/turkey-france-and-italy-sign-an-agreement-on-air-defense/> (accessed 20 December 2024).

⁴⁰ Eurosam, "Turkey contracts Eurosam, Aselsan and Roketsan to define its future indigenous air and missile defence system", Press release (05 January 2018), <https://eurosam.com/turkey-contracts-eurosam-aselsan-and-roketsan-to-define-its-future-indigeneous-air-and-missile-defense-system/> (accessed 20 December 2024).

⁴¹ Fabrice Wolf, "Turkey denounces French obstruction to its anti-missile defence program", *Meta-Defense* (online), 07 January 2020, <https://www.meta-defense.fr/en/2020/01/07/Turkey-denounces-French-obstruction-of-its-anti-missile-defense-program/> (accessed 20 December 2024).

mediating role between Russia and Ukraine.⁴² In September 2024, the cooperation was continuing but had yet to yield results.⁴³

Lastly, in October 2024 Germany agreed to permit the export of Eurofighter warplanes to Türkiye, but the planned sale of French-Italian SAMP-T surface-to-air systems was not concluded despite the requests of the Turkish authorities.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, the French military-industrial sector faces new competitors, despite its position as the world's second-largest arms exporter in the years 2019–2023.⁴⁵ These include Türkiye, due to the rise of Türkiye's defence industry in recent years and its growing exports.⁴⁶ According to the 2023 and 2024 reports to the French parliament on France's arms exports, these new players, including Türkiye, "are benefiting from their increasingly sophisticated products and lax export controls".⁴⁷

⁴² Tayfun Ozberk, "Turkey and Italy hint at return to SAMP/T air defense efforts", *Defense News* (online), 01 April 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/industry/techwatch/2022/04/01/turkey-and-italy-hint-at-return-to-sampt-air-defense-efforts/> (accessed 15 October 2024); Sakshi Tiwari, "S-400 of France! NATO's 'dissident' ally to sign treaty with France and Italy for SAMP/T air defense system", *Eurasian Times* (online), 06 July 2022, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/s-400-of-france-natos-dissident-ally-to-sign-treaty-with-france-italy/> (accessed 15 February 2025).

⁴³ Patrice Moyeuve, "France", in *Türkiye's Defence-industrial Relationships with other European States*, ed. Tom Waldwyn (London: The International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2024): 7, https://www.iiss.org/globalassets/media-library---content--migration/files/research-papers/2024/09/trk4/iiss_turkiyes-defence-industrial-relationships-with-other-european-states_11092024.pdf (accessed 28 November 2024).

⁴⁴ Levent Kenez, "Turkey open to previously owned Eurofighter purchase amid urgent air force needs", *Nordic Monitor* (online), 07 February 2025, <https://nordicmonitor.com/2025/02/turkey-open-to-previously-owned-eurofighter-purchase-amid-urgent-air-force-needs/> (accessed 15 February 2025).

⁴⁵ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), "France narrowly overtook Russia to become the world's second largest exporter of major arms in 2019–23. French arms exports represented 11 per cent of all arms transfers in this period, having increased by 47 per cent between 2014–18 and 2019–23. France delivered major arms to 64 states in 2019–23, but India was by far the largest recipient, accounting for 29 per cent of French arms exports. The bulk of France's arms exports in 2019–23 went to states in Asia and Oceania (42 per cent of arms exports) and the Middle East (34 per cent)."

Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in international arms transfers, 2023, Factsheet* (Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], March 2024): 4–5, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/fs_2403_at_2023.pdf (accessed 05 December 2024).

⁴⁶ Jens Bastian, *Türkiye: An Emerging Global Arms Exporter: Growing Competitiveness and Strategic Recalibration of the Turkish Defence Industry*, SWP Comment C06/2024 (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik [SWP], 23 February 2024), https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2024C06_Turkey_ArmsExporter.pdf (accessed 05 December 2024);

Jean-Michel Bezat, "France's defense industry threatened by new competitors", *Le Monde* (online), 10 January 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/economy/article/2024/01/10/france-s-defense-industry-threatened-by-new-competitors_6418389_19.html (accessed 05 July 2024).

⁴⁷ Ministère des Armées, July 2023: 44;

Ministère des Armées, *Rapport au Parlement sur les exportations d'armement de la France: 2024 [Report to Parliament on French arms exports: 2024]* (Paris, July 2024): 46, <http://bit.ly/4n1n3tb> (accessed 20 November 2024).

Several factors explain the growing competition between French and Turkish defence exporters. France's principal defence export is its Rafale fighter (as illustrated by the sale of 80 aircraft to the United Arab Emirates in 2022), but faces more difficulties exporting its other products, with the exception of Caesar artillery pieces. France is losing ground in Europe to other competitors, in particular the United States, and finds itself increasingly dependent on its Middle Eastern markets. Moreover, France has missed out on the "offset".⁴⁸ Finally, the war in Ukraine has created new constraints, complicating delivery schedules and availability.

Türkiye, in the meantime, has been diversifying its partners and opening up new markets, particularly in Europe. The Turkish defence industry's innovations include armed drones that have proved their effectiveness on various battlefields and attracted international interest. France lags far behind here. Türkiye also offers competitive prices, even if its defence-related products are not as technologically advanced as those of France. The gap is particularly large in the naval, aerospace – with the exception of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) – and space sectors, and in defence electronics – despite recent progress by companies such as Aselsan and Havelsan. Turkish defence exporters benefit from facing fewer restrictions and difficulties in acquiring export licences that their counterparts in France.⁴⁹

The field of land forces is the principal arena for competition, given the extensive portfolio of systems developed by the Turkish defence industry.⁵⁰ One of the main geographical areas of competition outside Europe is sub-Saharan Africa, where France and Türkiye both export arms in comparable volumes. France was the third-largest supplier to sub-Saharan Africa in 2019–2023, with an 11 per cent share of the region's arms imports, whereas Türkiye was the fourth-largest supplier, with a share of 6.3 per cent. Türkiye's figure is attributable largely to its deliveries of combat helicopters to Nigeria and trainer/combat aircraft and drones (UAVs) to several states.⁵¹

Over the last few years, experts report, France has largely discontinued high-level dialogue with Türkiye for a range of political and security reasons. The political elites in France strongly criticised the Turkish military operations in north-eastern Syria that started in 2016 were by as well as Türkiye's acquisition of the Russian S-400 surface-to-air missile system in 2017, which appeared to mark a shift away from

⁴⁸ "Offsets in defense trade encompass a range of industrial and commercial benefits provided to foreign governments as an inducement or condition to purchase military goods or services, including benefits such as co-production, licensed production, subcontracting, technology transfer, purchasing, and credit assistance."

U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Industry and Security, *Offsets in Defense Trade: Twenty-Fourth Study, Conducted Pursuant to Section 723 of the Defense Production Act of 1950, as amended* (Washington D.C.: July 2020): 1, <https://www.bis.doc.gov/index.php/documents/sies/2587-twenty-fourth-report-to-congress-7-20/file> (accessed 20 April 2025).

⁴⁹ Patrice Moyeuve, 2024: 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain and Siemon T. Wezeman, 2024: 8.

NATO in Ankara's foreign and defence policies. All this negatively impacted relations between France and Türkiye in the field of arms production.

Türkiye's military operation in northern Syria in October 2019, following Trump's order to withdraw American forces from north-eastern Syria, marked a turning point in relations between Türkiye and France. In a joint statement on 14 October 2019, the French foreign and defence ministers stated that France "reiterated its firm condemnation of the unilateral offensive" launched by Türkiye in north-eastern Syria, which "called into question the security and stabilisation efforts of the global coalition against Daesh" and "therefore undermined Europe's security".⁵² France, they said, had consequently decided to suspend all planned exports of "war materials" to Türkiye that could be used in the Turkish offensive.⁵³ Nearly five hundred licences were suspended with immediate effect, although they "did not all represent significant amounts", as Defence Minister Florence Parly told the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee of the French Senate on 15 October 2019.⁵⁴ Türkiye "is not one of the countries with which we trade the most", she added, referring to annual military exports worth about €50 million.⁵⁵ According to some parliamentarians, the low level of military trade made it relatively easy for France to suspend arms exports. Senator Ladislav Poniatowski of the Republican Party commented: "As for France's position, I must express my disappointment. The announcement of the suspension of exports is of little significance, given that the amount involved is only around €45 million. Unfortunately, this shows that France is no longer a major player in this region."⁵⁶

Dealing with an unpredictable partner in a volatile environment, France has gradually stopped authorising the arms sales to Türkiye, which ranked only 30th in the list of importers of French arms during the period 2013–2022. As a consequence, bilateral cooperation on defence-related programmes appears to be close to zero. The most significant exchanges take place within the NATO framework.⁵⁷

⁵² Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères and Ministère des Armées, "Communiqué conjoint du Ministre de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères et de la Ministre des Armées: La France suspend ses exportations de matériels de guerre vers la Turquie" [Joint statement by the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs and the Minister for the Armed Forces: France suspends its exports of war materiel to Turkey], Press release (Paris, 14 October 2019), <https://uk.ambafrance.org/La-France-suspend-ses-exportations-de-materiels-de-guerre-vers-la-Turquie> (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁵³ Ibid.

"France, Germany halt arms exports to Turkey", *Agence France Presse (AFP)*, 12 October 2019.

⁵⁴ Sénat, *Comptes rendus de la Commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées: Projet de loi de finances pour 2020 – Audition de Mme Florence Parly, ministre des armées* [Reports of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and the Armed Forces: Finance Bill 2020 – Hearing of Mrs Florence Parly, Minister for the Armed Forces] (Paris, 15 October 2019), <https://www.senat.fr/compte-rendu-commissions/20191014/etr.html#toc3> (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Patrice Moyeuve, 2024: 8.

Cooperation and Rivalry in the Political and Security Spheres

Nicolas Sarkozy 2007–2012 presidency marked a turning point in France’s official position towards Türkiye. Citing geographical arguments (“Türkiye is in Asia Minor”), Sarkozy proposed the Union for the Mediterranean, in which Türkiye was expected to play a central role, as an alternative to EU membership. He repeated his opposition to Turkish EU membership on several occasions, notably at the EU-US summit in Prague in April 2009, in reaction to President Obama’s support for Türkiye’s accession, and again in February 2011 during his visit to Ankara as President of the G20.

Relations between France and Türkiye eased a little during the presidency of François Hollande (2012 to 2017), helped by Hollande’s state visit to Türkiye in January 2014 and the lifting of France’s veto on the opening of new negotiating chapters. The Syrian civil war and its implications for security cooperation also played a significant role in increasing bilateral cooperation on terrorism and irregular migration.

2.2.2.1 Security Implications of the Syrian Civil War: The Need to Expand Cooperation on Terrorism and Irregular Migration

From the mid-2010s, the security implications of the Syrian civil war – in particular the so-called refugee crisis and terrorist attacks attributed to ISIS in Türkiye and France – led to a rapprochement between the two countries and an intensification of bilateral dialogue. Despite regular criticisms of authoritarian trends in Türkiye’s political system, the French authorities were forced to treat Türkiye as a key partner in dealing with two critical issues: the European migration crisis and the fight against terrorism.

French President Hollande’s state visit to Türkiye in January 2014 launched the process establishing a strategic cooperation framework, which led to the adoption in October 2014 of a joint action plan for cooperation for the period 2014–2016. This road map reaffirmed the objectives of close cooperation in areas such as EU accession negotiations, the readmission agreement signed by Türkiye and the EU in 2013, and visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens in the EU. It enhanced cooperation in the fields of security, counterterrorism, organised crime, illegal immigration, human trafficking and counterfeiting. The joint action plan also contained provisions for cooperation in the field of defence, including between defence industries, as well as in the areas of justice and home affairs. The French-Turkish dialogue on defence and security issues has been maintained over the years, particularly in the fight against terrorist networks.

In the context of this revival of bilateral security cooperation, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius stated in February 2015 that France regarded Türkiye as an ally and was maintaining close cooperation in order to fight ISIS and to close the routes used

by radical fighters, in particular French, who were transiting through Türkiye on their way to Syria. He added that France welcomed Türkiye's decision to allow Kurdish Peshmergas from Iraq to travel to Kobane to defend the town, and that France would continue to cooperate with Türkiye on Syrian and Iraqi issues.⁵⁸

Throughout these years, the return of French jihadists (whose numbers were estimated at over one hundred in 2015) from Syria was a central issue for France in the fight against terrorism. Visits to Türkiye by the French defence and interior ministers in January and February 2016 focussed on strengthening bilateral cooperation in this field.

On the initiative of then German Chancellor Angela Merkel, the EU and Türkiye adopted a declaration and a joint action plan in November 2015, followed by an agreement on refugees in March 2016. This new “partnership” between the EU and Türkiye provoked reactions in France and across Europe. In France, a heated political debate was instigated in late 2015 by the right-wing opposition in the French National Assembly (Republicans, Union of Democrats and independents), whose criticism of the EU-Türkiye joint action plan focussed on three main points:

- Türkiye's “migration blackmail”, allegedly “manipulating” the migration issue by opening its borders and “exploiting” migrants to take Europe “hostage”. Allegedly Türkiye bore primary responsibility for the Syrian conflict and the migration crisis affecting Europe;
- Türkiye's “ambiguity” in the fight against terrorism, supposedly playing a double game with the Kurds and Daesh by keeping its borders closed to Kurdish fighters but open to jihadists; the allegation of Turkish support for the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) led some MPs to question Türkiye's loyalty as a NATO ally;
- the resumption of EU accession negotiations despite strong public opposition and the risk of endless EU enlargement.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Assemblée Nationale Française, *Déclaration de M. Laurent Fabius, ministre des affaires étrangères et du développement international, en réponse à une question sur la coopération entre la France et la Turquie dans la lutte contre le terrorisme, à l'Assemblée nationale le 17 février 2015* [Statement by Mr Laurent Fabius, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Development, in response to a question on cooperation between France and Turkey in the fight against terrorism, at the National Assembly on 17 February 2015] (Paris, 17 February 2015a), <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/193936-laurent-fabius-17022015-cooperation-france-turquie-contre-terrorisme> (accessed 05 July 2024).

⁵⁹ Assemblée Nationale Française, *Compte rendu: Commission des affaires étrangères: Audition, ouverte à la presse et conjointe avec la commission des lois et la commission des affaires européennes, de M. Dimítris Avramópoulos, commissaire européen chargé de la Migration, des Affaires intérieures et de la Citoyenneté* [Minutes: Committee on Foreign Affairs: Hearing, open to the press and held jointly with the Committee on Legal Affairs and the Committee on European Affairs, of Dimítris Avramópoulos, European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship] (Paris, 01 December 2015b), <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/cr-cafe/15-16/c1516024.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2025); Assemblée Nationale Française, *Assemblée nationale. XIVe législature: Session ordinaire de 2015–2016: Compte rendu intégral: Première séance du mardi 01 décembre 2015 – Questions au gouvernement: relations avec la Turquie* [National Assembly. XIVth Legislature: 2015–2016 Ordinary Session: Verbatim Report: First

The French government reacted to the criticisms by moderating its support for stronger ties between the EU and Türkiye. It focussed on four main arguments:

- The importance of the “strategic relationship” with Türkiye in the geopolitical context and the need to preserve a “logic of partnership and cooperation” with a “strategic partner of France and the EU”.
- The clear distinction between the EU–Türkiye joint action plan on irregular migration and the EU membership negotiations, in order to rule out any suspicion of bargaining, “blackmail” or “bartering”.
- The responsibility of previous French governments, which had supported opening several chapters and contributed to the progress membership negotiations.
- The rights of the French electorate, who would have to approve Turkish accession in a referendum (as President Hollande reminded Türkiye during his state visit in 2014).⁶⁰

The EU–Türkiye agreement of March 2016 drew widespread criticism in France, focussing especially on the restrictions it placed on the right of asylum. The procedures to readmit irregular migrants from Greece to Türkiye, the “bargaining” between Türkiye and the EU, and the conditions for respecting the right of asylum were the most controversial points. During the debates in the French National Assembly, the left-wing political parties (Socialist Party, Greens) strongly criticised the “outsourcing” of immigration management to Türkiye, which they described as an “accommodation camp”. Some parliamentarians also criticised the malfunctioning of European political institutions, the challenging of the EU’s fundamental principles, a “cowardly and ineffective” agreement, and deteriorating human rights in Türkiye (attacks on media freedom, resumption of the Kurdish conflict). After criticism from the opposition, the French government provided additional resources to ensure that the right of asylum was respected.⁶¹

session on Tuesday 01 December 2015 – Questions to the Government: relations with Turkey] (Paris, 01 December 2015c), <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2015-2016/20160073.asp#P671513> (accessed 20 January 2025);
Assemblée Nationale Française, *Assemblée nationale. XIVe législature: Session ordinaire de 2015–2016: Compte rendu intégral: Première séance du mercredi 16 décembre 2015 – Questions au gouvernement sur des sujets européens: Turquie* [National Assembly. XIVth Legislature: 2015–2016 Ordinary Session: Verbatim Report: First session on Wednesday 16 December 2015 – Questions to the Government on European issues: Turkey] (Paris, 16 December 2015d), <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2015-2016/20160089.asp#P688934> (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Assemblée Nationale Française, *Assemblée nationale. XIVe législature: Session ordinaire de 2015–2016: Compte rendu intégral: Séance du mercredi 23 mars 2016 – Questions au gouvernement: Accord entre l’Union européenne et la Turquie sur les migrants* [National Assembly. XIVth Legislature: 2015–2016 Ordinary Session: Verbatim Report: Sitting of Wednesday 23 March 2016 – Questions to the Government: Agreement between the European Union and Turkey on migrants] (Paris, 23 March 2016a), <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2015-2016/20160158.asp#P756772> (accessed 20 January 2025);
Assemblée Nationale Française, *Assemblée nationale. XIVe législature: Session ordinaire de 2015–2016: Compte rendu intégral: Deuxième séance du mardi 29 mars 2016 – Questions au gouvernement: Accord entre l’Union européenne et la Turquie sur les migrants* [National Assembly. XIVth Legislature: 2015–2016 Ordinary Session: Verbatim Report: Second sitting of Tuesday 29 March 2016 – Questions to the Government:

2.2.2.2 Facing Increasing Divergence in Foreign Policy Since 2017

Bilateral relations have worsened on several axes since Emmanuel Macron's election to the presidency in 2017. As already noted, the French authorities strongly criticised Türkiye's military operations in Syria from 2016, in particular 2019's Operation Peace Spring. Türkiye's acquisition of the Russian S-400 air defence system in 2017 also raised concerns among NATO members, including France.

Concerns about human rights following the failed military coup attempt in July 2016 and the subsequent state of emergency, as well as growing personal tensions between the two leaders have gradually produced a "confrontational stance" between the two countries over the past decade. During President Erdoğan's visit to Paris on 5 January 2018, Macron said he thought it was "clear" that "recent developments" in the area of human rights in Türkiye ruled out any "progress" in EU accession negotiations and proposed a "partnership" for Türkiye "in place of membership". The French president's openness about Türkiye's prospects of EU membership were not taken well by his Turkish counterpart.

In 2020 and 2021, controversial French legislation against separatism – which provided for tighter regulation of mosques and required imams to be trained and certified in France (ending Türkiye's sending of imams to France) – provoked strong criticism in Türkiye. In October, Erdoğan denounced Macron's statements on "Islamist separatism" and the need to "structure Islam" in France as a provocation, and declared that Macron needed mental health treatment. He also called for a boycott of French products in Türkiye. His comments were deemed unacceptable by Macron and unanimously condemned by the EU member states.

Aside from domestic political issues creating bilateral tensions, France and Türkiye also increasingly found themselves in confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya and the South Caucasus. As Greek-Turkish tensions grew, amidst an increase in maritime incidents between Türkiye and its Greek and Cypriot neighbours, French support for Greece led to growing military and security tensions between France and Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean in 2019–2020, which were exacerbated by France's new defence partnership with Greece. Macron sought to portray himself as the defender of European sovereignty by adopting a confrontational stance towards Türkiye.

Agreement between the European Union and Turkey on migrants] (Paris, 29 March 2016b), <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2015-2016/20160162.asp#P759989> (accessed 20 January 2025);
Assemblée Nationale Française, *Assemblée nationale: XIVe législature: Session ordinaire de 2015–2016: Compte rendu intégral: Première séance du mardi 5 avril 2016 – Questions au gouvernement: Accord des migrants en Europe* [National Assembly: XIVth Legislature: 2015–2016 Ordinary Session: Verbatim Report: First sitting of Tuesday 5 April 2016 – Questions to the Government: Agreement on migrants in Europe] (Paris, 05 April 2016c), <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/cr/2015-2016/20160168.asp#P763845> (accessed 20 January 2025).

Tensions came to a head in summer 2020 when Türkiye resumed oil and gas exploration in the Eastern Mediterranean, triggering a major diplomatic crisis with Greece. The deployment of a seismic research vessel – the *Oruç Reis* – in Greek territorial waters, escorted by eighteen naval vessels, led to a military escalation between the two NATO allies, with the risk of direct confrontation. German mediation temporarily calmed the situation, while France reaffirmed its support for Greece. EU member states Greece, Cyprus and France proposed sanctions against Türkiye, but the European Foreign Affairs Council (13 July 2020) and the European Council (October 2020, June 2021) decided against.

The bilateral relationship continued to deeply deteriorate. A Turkish–French naval incident in June 2020 saw a French frigate under NATO command in a tense confrontation with a Turkish frigate in the Eastern Mediterranean, leading France to suspend its participation in the NATO operation *Sea Guardian*. This incident in the Mediterranean came at a time when several NATO allies, led by France, were questioning Türkiye’s role in the Libyan conflict. In the Libyan civil war of 2014 to 2020, Türkiye backed Fayeze al-Sarraj’s UN-recognised Government of National Unity (GNA) against the dissident forces of Marshal Khalifa Haftar, which were backed by countries including Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Ankara regularly ferried fighters and military equipment, including drones, to Libya (which involved transferring jihadist fighters from Syria). An agreement signed in November 2019 authorised Türkiye to intervene militarily in Libya to support the GNA, which raised concerns in the Libyan parliament and among Türkiye’s Western partners.

France in particular, as a NATO member, accused Türkiye of expanding its military presence in Libya by supplying arms to the Tripoli-based GNA in violation of the United Nations embargo and denounced Türkiye’s “unacceptable” interventionism. According to Paris, Türkiye’s military support for the GNA offensive torpedoed efforts to achieve an immediate ceasefire and was characterized by “hostile and unacceptable behaviour by Türkiye’s maritime forces towards NATO allies, which aimed at hampering efforts to implement the UN Security Council arms embargo”.⁶² In late June 2020, Macron accused Türkiye of bearing “historic and criminal responsibility” in the Libyan conflict as a country that “claimed to be a member of NATO”.⁶³

Meanwhile, France also launched new military cooperations with Türkiye’s neighbours in the Mediterranean and the Caucasus and expanded existing ones. On 27 September 2021, France and Greece signed a strategic partnership under which Athens was to purchase at least three modern frigates. A mutual defence clause strengthened

⁶² “Libye: Paris dénonce à l’Otan ‘l’agressivité’ de la Turquie” [Libya: Paris denounces Turkey’s ‘aggressiveness’ to NATO], *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 17 June 2020.

⁶³ Rym Momtaz, “Macron accuses Turkey of ‘criminal responsibility’ in Libya”, *Politico* (online), 29 June 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/article/macron-accuses-turkey-of-criminal-responsibility-in-libya/> (accessed 22 September 2024).

Greece's status as one of France's major European arms markets. In 2019–2023 more than half of France's European arms exports (53%) went to Greece, mostly in the form of seventeen Rafale warplanes.⁶⁴ In October 2023 France launched a new military cooperation to supply defence equipment to Armenia, while Türkiye was supporting Azerbaijan in the conflict between the two. The fighting for control of Nagorno-Karabakh between September and November 2020 confirmed Türkiye's new regional geopolitical role. According to many observers, Baku's victory depended on Türkiye's political and military support, in particular the decisive role played by Turkish drones used in the final battles⁶⁵. In December 2020 the French foreign minister denounced Türkiye for ferrying mercenaries from Syria to fight alongside Azerbaijani forces and said that Türkiye had "played both the competition card and the card of collusion with Russia ... to the detriment of the region's security and stability".⁶⁶ France also strengthened its military cooperation with Greece.

The question of Türkiye's loyalty as a NATO ally arose again in connection with its stance towards the Swedish and Finnish membership applications to join NATO. Macron repeatedly urged Türkiye to support Sweden's bid and underlined "the need to respect the sovereign choice of these two countries, which emerged from a democratic process and in reaction to the changes in their security environment".⁶⁷

Türkiye's stance on Sweden's NATO membership was discussed by the French Permanent Representative to NATO during a closed session of the Defence and Armed Forces Committee of the French National Assembly on 19 July 2023, following the NATO summit in Vilnius on 11 and 12 July 2023. Commenting on Türkiye's decision to forward Sweden's accession protocols to the Turkish Parliament for ratification, the French ambassador said she felt that the Turkish president clearly wanted to avoid causing a crisis during the summit by denying Sweden membership. In response to the final conditions raised by Türkiye before the summit – calling for the reopening of EU-Türkiye negotiations – she pointed out that Türkiye could not extract concessions concerning the EU because NATO was not the proper forum to address such an issue. Several participants at the summit, including the President of the European Council, said that resuming Türkiye's EU accession negotiations did not fall within the scope of

⁶⁴ Pieter D. Wezeman, Katarina Djokic, Mathew George, Zain Hussain and Siemon T. Wezeman, 2024: 4–5.

⁶⁵ "Turkey hails Azerbaijan 'gains' after Karabakh deal", *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 10 November 2020; Jean-François Chapelle, "Le Haut-Karabakh, une victoire en demi-teinte pour la Turquie" [Nagorno-Karabakh, a half-hearted victory for Turkey], *Le Monde* (online), 12 November 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2020/11/12/le-haut-karabakh-une-victoire-en-demi-teinte-pour-la-turquie_6059454_3210.html (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁶⁶ Vie publique, "Déclaration de M. Jean-Yves Le Drian, ministre de l'Europe et des affaires étrangères, sur le conflit du Haut-Karabagh, à Paris le 3 décembre 2020" [Statement by Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, on the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, in Paris on 3 December 2020], Paris, 03 December 2020, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/277584-jean-yves-le-drian-03122020-haut-karabagh> (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁶⁷ Jan van der Made, "French president urges Turkey to support Sweden's bid to join NATO", *RFI* (online), 30 June 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/international/20230630-france-emmanuel-macron-urges-turkey-to-support-sweden-nato-membership> (accessed 15 September 2024).

the discussion on Sweden's NATO membership. She concluded that the Turkish president had "obtained certain perspectives, notably compensation for Washington's decision not to supply F-35 warplanes, which created a capability deficit for Türkiye as we [France] had delivered Rafales to Greece, which strengthened Greece, notably in the Aegean".⁶⁸

During the same hearing, the chair of the Defence and Armed Forces Committee wondered whether Türkiye was not looking for an honourable way out during the NATO summit. He suggested that the Turkish President could say that he had obtained a promise, even if he knew it was fragile. For him, it was a kind of political way out. Finally, the chair concluded, "playing the power game would have discredited Türkiye without any substantial gain".⁶⁹

At the European level, Türkiye did not always attend French political initiatives such as the EPC. Türkiye participated in the first EPC summit in Prague in October 2022, and again in Budapest in November 2024, when Erdoğan made a speech emphasising Türkiye's contribution to Europe's prosperity and security and calling on the EU member states to strengthen Türkiye's membership perspective in light of the geopolitical situation.⁷⁰ Türkiye also welcomed the Strategic Compass adopted by the EU in March 2022 for the chapter concerning the Eastern Mediterranean.

2.3

French Perceptions of Türkiye: Ally, Rival or Threat?

Very little information is available about French perceptions of Türkiye, in particular in the spheres of defence and security. It turned out to be virtually impossible to arrange interviews with members of the French Ministry of Armed Forces. A report published in 2021 provides insights into how the French military perceived the Turkish military during the tensions in the Mediterranean in 2020. Based on interviews with French officers, the results indicated that the French military showed

⁶⁸ Assemblée Nationale Française, *Compte rendu de réunion n° 95 – Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées: Audition, à huis clos, de Mme Muriel Domenach, ambassadrice, représentante permanente de la France au conseil de l'OTAN pour un retour sur le sommet de l'OTAN des 11 et 12 juillet 2023 à Vilnius: Mercredi 19 juillet 2023* [Record of meeting No 95 – Committee on National Defence and Armed Forces: Hearing, not open to public, of Mrs Muriel Domenach, Ambassador, Permanent Representative of France to the NATO Council, on the NATO summit of 11 and 12 July 2023 in Vilnius: Wednesday 19 July 2023] (Paris, 15 September 2023), https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/16/comptes-rendus/cion_def/l16cion_def2223095_compte-rendu# (accessed 20 January 2025).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, *There is no reasonable justification for blocking Türkiye's EU accession* (Ankara, 07 November 2024), <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/there-is-no-reasonable-justification-for-blocking-turkiyes-eu-accession> (accessed 15 January 2025).

respect for the Turkish armed forces, which were generally credited with professionalism, reliability, efficiency and determination. Interviewees criticized the Turkish attitude in the Mediterranean – in particular the frigate incident in 2020 – saying that such behaviour, along with unilateral actions and *faits accomplis*, would not be tolerated in the future.⁷¹

In the context of Türkiye's application to join the EU, the Turkish issue was thoroughly debated by the political elite and assessed by opinion surveys. Over the past ten years, the 2016 Turkish–EU agreement on irregular migration has also generated intense debates in the French National Assembly. Since the start of the war in Ukraine, however, Türkiye's foreign and security policies have provoked fewer strong reactions at the national political level, as Türkiye's role in fostering peace tends to be seen positively by the French authorities.

2.3.1

Popular Perceptions: The French People Against Türkiye?

French opinion surveys indicate a strong mistrust of Türkiye, which is often perceived more as a “threat” than an ally. In a survey carried out in December 2021, respondents were shown a list of twenty countries and asked which they thought were allies or threats to France. A majority of French respondents (56%) regarded Türkiye as the most important threat, while only a very small minority (9%) saw it as an ally. By comparison, almost half of the French respondents (45%) in a similar survey in 2008 named Iran as the most threatening country, while Türkiye was not even proposed as an option.⁷²

The results of the same survey in 2021 include another interesting finding: in an international environment marked by a growing terrorist threat, more than 7 in 10 French respondents also felt that France and Europe should be firmer towards countries promoting political Islam (such as Türkiye and Qatar) (72%).⁷³ The same year's German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) Transatlantic Trends also asked respondents about trust and loyalty. 72 per cent of the French respondents said they did not think that Türkiye was a reliable partner.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Aris Marghelis, *The French Military's Perception of the Turkish Military and Turkey's Expansion in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Etudes de l'Ifri (Paris: French Institute of International Relations [Ifri], November 2021), <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/french-militarys-perception-turkish-military-and-turkeys-expansion-eastern-mediterranean> (accessed 16 April 2025).

⁷² Harris Interactive, France 24 and International Herald Tribune, 2008.

⁷³ Harris Interactive, 2021.

⁷⁴ The German Marshall Fund (GMF), *Transatlantic Trends 2021: Newly Published Polling Data from the U.S., Canada, Key European Allies, Turkey Reveals Shifting Dynamics in Post-Trump Transatlantic Relationship Ahead of Biden's First Trip to Europe* (Washington D.C., 07 June 2021), <https://www.gmfus.org/news/transatlantic-trends-2021-newly-published-polling-data-us-canada-key-european-allies-turkey> (accessed 22 September 2024).

French politicians and political parties were overwhelmingly opposed to Türkiye's accession to the EU, since the debate began in the 2000s. Opinion polls also show growing public opposition. In March 2022, more than two-thirds of French respondents were still opposed to Türkiye's accession to the EU (70%).⁷⁵ The strongest support for Türkiye in France came from business communities, which were traditionally in favour of closer ties between and supported Türkiye joining the EU. This can be explained by the significant commercial relations between the two countries, which grown in recent years. Think tanks such as the Institut du Bosphore function as intermediaries between French and Turkish political and business circles.⁷⁶

2.3.2

Political and Security Perceptions of Türkiye: From Valuable Ally to Strategic Competitor

Perceptions of Türkiye in French political and security circles have evolved significantly over the past ten years, and appear rather divided between the need to continue cooperating with Türkiye as a major partner and ally, and a growing sense of mistrust that leads Türkiye to be perceived as a competitor.

A report published by the French Senate in 2019 stressed that Türkiye remained highly important for France, Europe and NATO despite tensions at the bilateral level.⁷⁷ It emphasised the need to keep Türkiye within NATO and anchored to Europe. In this connection the report advised stepping up efforts to improve French-Turkish relations. It argued that French and Turkish positions converged on the Syrian crisis as a whole, even if Türkiye regarded French support for the Syrian Kurds against Daesh as a serious “irritant”. Both countries were supporting a political rather than military solution to the Syrian crisis and, the report argued, Türkiye was playing an essential political role.

The same report mentioned Iran as another point of convergence between France and Türkiye, with the aim of maintaining the effects of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) despite the US withdrawal and avoiding isolating or breaking off dialogue with Iran – but without ignoring its destabilising actions. The importance of the relationship related to Syria and Iran clearly showed that France saw Türkiye as a pole of relative stability in the Middle East that remained anchored within Western

⁷⁵ Harris Interactive, 2022.

⁷⁶ Institut du Bosphore website: <https://www.institut-bosphore.org/> (accessed 15 December 2024).

⁷⁷ Ladislav Poniatowski, Jean-Marc Todeschini and René Danesi, *Rapport d'information fait au nom de la commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées par le groupe de travail sur la situation en Turquie* [Information report drawn up on behalf of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces by the working group on the situation in Turkey], no.°629, (Paris: French Senate, July 2019), <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r15-736/r15-7361.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2024).

strategic alliances. Finally, the report stressed the need for France and Europe to maintain dialogue and attentive listening with Türkiye.⁷⁸

The latest Senate report was published in January 2025, entitled *Strengthening French-Turkish relations to act jointly for peace*. It emphasises for the first time the need for bilateral military cooperation in order to strengthen trust between France and Türkiye. The report argues that the resumption of bilateral dialogue in the military field would be useful given the shared goals, the respective levels of expertise of the Turkish and French defence industrial and technological bases, and the need to bolster the industrial capabilities of NATO member countries.⁷⁹

Over recent years, despite past tensions and crises between the two countries, Macron has repeatedly reminded his Turkish counterpart of France's readiness to develop a positive bilateral agenda, particularly in the framework of ongoing discussions on Europe's strategic autonomy. Examples include a meeting at the Fifth European Political Community Summit on 7 November 2024 in Budapest, a phone call on 18 December 2024, and another on then again on 7 February 2025.⁸⁰

France and Türkiye also share common positions on a range of pressing regional and international issues such as Ukraine, Lebanon, Syria and Gaza. When Macron and Erdoğan met at the Fifth European Political Community Summit in Budapest on 7 November 2024, Macron hailed Türkiye's efforts to ensure maritime security in the Black Sea. Concerning the hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, the two presidents called for an immediate ceasefire to revive diplomatic efforts on the basis of Security Council Resolution 1701 and the Blue Line between Israel and Lebanon. Macron also thanked Türkiye for its participation in the International Conference in Support of Lebanon's People and Sovereignty in Paris on 24 October

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Christian Cambon, Olivier Cigolotti, Nicole Duranton, Sylvie Goy-Chavent and Jean-Marc Vayssouze-Faure, *Strengthening French-Turkish relations to act jointly for peace* (Paris: French Senate January 2025): 9–10, <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r24-257/r24-257-syn-en.pdf> (accessed 20 February 2025).

⁸⁰ Présidence de la République, "Entretien avec Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Président de la République de Turquie, en marge du 5e Sommet de la Communauté politique européenne à Budapest" [Interview with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of the Republic of Turkey, on the sidelines of the 5th Summit of the European Political Community in Budapest], Press release (Paris, 07 November 2024b), <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/11/07/entretien-avec-recep-tayyip-erdogan-president-de-la-republique-de-turquie-en-marge-du-5e-sommet-de-la-communaute-politique-europeenne-a-budapest> (accessed 15 December 2024);

Présidence de la République, "Entretien téléphonique avec Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Président de la République de Turquie" [Telephone conversation with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of the Republic of Turkey], Press release (Paris, 18 December 2024c), <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2024/12/18/entretien-telephonique-avec-recep-tayyip-erdogan-president-de-la-republique-de-turquie-1> (accessed 20 December 2024);

Présidence de la République, "Entretien téléphonique avec Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Président de la République de Turquie" [Telephone conversation with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President of the Republic of Turkey], Press release (Paris, 07 February 2025), <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2025/02/07/entretien-telephonique-avec-recep-tayyip-erdogan-president-de-la-republique-de-turquie-2> (accessed 15 February 2025).

2024, which raised US\$1 billion for Lebanon. Concerning the situation in the Caucasus, both leaders also expressed support for the normalisation of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan.⁸¹

During a phone call in December 2024, the two presidents hailed the fall of the Assad regime in Syria and signalled their wish for a peaceful and democratic political transition – in accordance with United Nations Resolution 2254 – that protects the fundamental rights of all communities in Syria. Concerning the situation in Gaza, the two presidents expressed their support for the ongoing ceasefire negotiations.⁸²

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, has put the controversial issue of the return of French jihadists from Syria back on the table. On 10 January 2025, Türkiye accused France and other European states of ignoring Ankara's security concerns in Syria by leaving French jihadists to be guarded by the Syrian Democratic Forces – which Türkiye sees as a terrorist group and a threat to its own national security – rather than repatriating them. Türkiye's Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan claimed that Washington was its only interlocutor in north-eastern Syria and urged France to repatriate its jailed jihadist nationals. The Turkish foreign minister's remarks came as Washington tried to dissuade its NATO ally from escalating an offensive against Kurdish fighters in north-eastern Syria.⁸³

The latest bilateral developments between top political leaders indicate a potential opening for cooperation on the armaments issue. During a phone call in February 2025, the French and Turkish presidents addressed bilateral relations. Erdoğan hailed the lifting of EU sanctions against Syria and stated that greater dialogue between Türkiye and France would contribute positively to relations and that the two countries had potential for cooperation in many areas, particularly in the defence industry.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, in the space of just a decade, Paris's perception of Türkiye has shifted significantly, from active cooperation to potential confrontation. The prevalence of tensions and clashes has, as noted above, negatively impacted the perception of Türkiye in political and security fields in France.

According to a French diplomatic source, multiple ambiguities cultivated by Türkiye have increased the level of distrust between the two countries to its highest point in recent years. These are:

⁸¹ Présidence de la République, 2024b.

⁸² Présidence de la République, 2024c

⁸³ "Turkey raps France, says US only counterpart in northeast Syria", *Agence France-Presse (AFP)*, 10 January 2025.

⁸⁴ Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye, *President Erdoğan, President Emmanuel Macron of France talk over phone* (Ankara, 07 February 2025), <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-president-emmanuel-macron-of-france-talk-over-phone-04-02-2025> (accessed 15 February 2025).

- Ambiguity concerning the conflict in Ukraine, which is viewed negatively in diplomatic circles, following Türkiye's refusal to join sanctions on Russia and its transformation into a transit hub for Russian trade. Here, Türkiye is maintaining its policy of balance by talking with both sides.
- Ambiguity about calls to respect international law, which Türkiye regards as malleable. On the one hand, Türkiye supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine and Azerbaijan, but on the other the Turkish military occupies northern Syria and Northern Cyprus, and violates maritime borders in the Mediterranean.
- Ambiguity concerning NATO, where Türkiye operates as if it were simultaneously within and outside the Alliance. It extracted a quid pro quo for Swedish membership and displays a transactional logic towards allies and adversaries alike. National considerations have taken precedence over the logic of defending common interests.⁸⁵

According to the same source, the feeling of distrust between France and Türkiye has three main sources:

- A negative perception of Türkiye as an unreliable, unfaithful and ambivalent partner.
- A lack of shared understanding with the Turkish political interlocutors – the AKP leaders – who are more conservative and/or nationalist than Türkiye's former Kemalist rulers.
- France's colonial heritage, as an unconscious and unacknowledged factor that creates inhibitions and psychological biases. The “ghost of Algeria” for France and the “Sèvres syndrome” for Türkiye (where the French are perceived as colonialists and Islamophobes) create psychological inhibitions that obstruct bilateral military cooperation.

Finally, diplomatic elites are currently tending to adopt a wait-and-see attitude until the next elections in Türkiye.⁸⁶

The same shift of perception can be observed in the French military and security fields. The 2013 French White Paper on Defence and National Security defined Türkiye as a valuable ally due to its regional activities and influence, economic dynamism, industrial and technological potential, and its dense web of relations with France and the EU countries. As an active member of NATO, Türkiye was also presented as occupying a singular place in the security of Europe and a key position in the defence and security posture of the Alliance (control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, military bases).

⁸⁵ Interview with a French diplomatic source, autumn 2024.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

In its Strategic Review update of 2017, Paris refers to a “destabilized Middle East” characterised by reconfigurations occurring in a context dominated by the influence of Russia, Iran and Türkiye. The Strategic Review update of 2021, is the first to refer to Türkiye as a potential competitor or rival seeking global reach and challenging Western influence:

“The American refocus on rivalry with China is also bolstering the confidence of countries such as Iran and Türkiye, which are seeking to assert themselves as regional powers and are tempted to seize strategic opportunities to consolidate their status or advance their interests. In so doing, these countries are participating in the contestation of the world order in the same way as Russia and China, or even in concert with them. Indeed, while these powers are often competitors, they have at the same time shown that they can overcome their divergences in order to squeeze out Western powers. [...] This trend [...] further weakens international and regional organisations by developing transactional models for resolving crises.”⁸⁷

The Astana format on Syria (Russia, Türkiye, Iran), which collapsed with the fall of Assad’s regime in December 2024, was considered the most significant illustration of this trend, which was also observed in other crises such as Libya or Afghanistan.

The Defence Ministry’s evolving perception of Türkiye was underlined by the French Chief of Defence Staff, General Thierry Burkhard, during a closed session of the Defence and Armed Forces Committee of the French National Assembly on 25 September 2024. He described Türkiye as a strategic competitor in Africa alongside other powers such as China, Russia and Iran. One of France’s priorities in Africa, he said, was to counter the influence of strategic competitors who had understood that Africa was full of resources and “up for grabs”. Türkiye’s activities and influence in several African countries, in particular in western Africa, seemed to have raised concerns among French political and military elites, even if the Türkiye’s status as a strategic competitor needs to be put into perspective, according to some sources in the French diplomatic field.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ministry of Armed Forces of France, 2021: 21–22.

⁸⁸ Assemblée Nationale Française, *Compte rendu de réunion n° 4 – Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées: Audition, à huis clos, du général d’armée Thierry Burkhard, chef d’état-major des Armées, pour un point sur les opérations des armées françaises: Mercredi 25 septembre 2024* [Meeting report no. 4 – Committee on National Defence and the Armed Forces: Hearing, behind closed doors, of Army General Thierry Burkhard, Chief of the Armed Forces Staff, for an update on French Army operations: Wednesday 25 September 2024] (Paris, 04 November 2024), https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/17/comptes-rendus/cion_def/117cion_def2324004_compte-rendu# (accessed 20 January 2025).

3.

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations: How to Overcome Distrust and Bilateral Tensions?

The weight of distrust and tension between France and Türkiye in recent years presents a real challenge. How to overcome the blockages?

Strategic dialogue on central military and security issues should be maintained and developed. These include first and foremost the fight against international terrorism (due to the ongoing presence of Daesh in Türkiye's border regions) and management of the migrant crisis. France could play a more prominent role in negotiations to renew the 2016 EU-Türkiye migration deal.

Potential convergences in the fields of energy, migration and security could be developed in conjunction with some of the priorities France advanced during its Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2022. Among the latter, promoting European sovereignty (in the fields of energy and migration) appears likely to fit with Türkiye's interests and thus foster convergence. As a regional energy hub, Türkiye could make a significant contribution to French and European energy sovereignty, and help France and Europe to reduce from their dependence on Russian energy imports. In the field of migration, Türkiye could help to improve the management of migration flows to Europe. In return, France could support and deepen these convergences by relaunching the visa liberalisation dialogue with the aim of abolishing Schengen visa requirement for Turkish citizens.

The following factors will influence any potential rapprochement between France and Türkiye:

- Efforts to improve communication (public diplomacy) and mutual perceptions. The Turkish community in France could have an important role to play.
- Political and security developments in the Eastern Mediterranean. The relationship between Greece and Türkiye and the evolution of France's military partnership with Greece will be crucial.
- The evolution of Türkiye's relations with Russia, during and after the conflict in Ukraine. Here, it will be relevant whether Türkiye's decides to join the BRICS (or not).
- The results of the next presidential and parliamentary elections in France and Türkiye (scheduled for 2027 and 2028 respectively). This will be relevant on account of the personal dimension of the relationship between the Turkish and French leaders.

US Vice President JD Vance's combative speech at the Munich Security Conference on 14 February 2025 and the fractious meeting between President Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in Washington on 28 February 2025 have turbocharged the European debate about building European strategic autonomy. France has positioned itself to play a leading role in mobilising European countries in order to strengthen Europe's defences, and hosted several meetings in Paris. At President Macron's initiative about a dozen EU and NATO leaders met in Paris on 17 February, three days after Vance's Munich speech, to discuss the strategic and security challenges facing Europe. And on 27 March, Macron hosted a new "coalition of the willing" summit on Ukraine in Paris, after the leaders of the 27 EU member states failed to reach agreement on financial aid for Ukraine.

Türkiye was invited to participate in several of meetings on Ukraine after the disastrous Trump-Zelensky meeting in Washington, in particular the 2 March London summit which was attended by twenty European leaders. Türkiye was also represented at the 11 March meeting of thirty military chiefs of staff, convened in Paris by President Macron to discuss security guarantees for Ukraine.

The prospect of Washington ending its support for Ukraine and doubts over its (nuclear) security guarantees for Europe have fundamentally changed the European context. Türkiye consistently underlines its importance for collective defence, in particular as NATO's second-largest army, and seeks to position itself in the new European security order.⁸⁹ President Erdoğan stresses Türkiye's key role in European defence, and sees Türkiye's accession to the EU as a contribution to strengthening Europe's defence capabilities.

⁸⁹ Killian Cogan, "Guerre en Ukraine: la Turquie se pose en alliée incontournable d'une Europe de la défense", *Les Echos* (online), 18 March 2025, <https://www.lesechos.fr/monde/afrique-moyen-orient/guerre-en-ukraine-la-turquie-se-pose-en-alliee-incontournable-dune-europe-de-la-defense-2154492> (accessed 26 March 2025).

Important questions remain unanswered, however. To what extent could Türkiye participate in the “coalition of the willing” called for by Macron? And if the United States intends to withdraw from NATO in Europe – which could open the path to a “Europeanisation” of the Alliance – would Türkiye become one of NATO’s European pillars? Such questions need to be discussed at the European level, and could force France to reconcile its mistrust of Ankara with the need to integrate Türkiye more deeply into European security organisations. In this context, France’s wish to re-establish some form of influence in the Middle East, following the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, could encourage the French authorities to soften their stance towards Türkiye in order to explore new forms of cooperation with a player that is seen as central, if not unavoidable on the Syrian issue.

At the time of writing, the conditions for Türkiye’s involvement in European defence remain unclear. Nor is it known whether and how French and Turkish interests might converge (or not) in the future. However, the new European dynamic could help to concretise Macron’s wish – which he has mentioned to his Turkish counterpart several times over the past few months – to involve Türkiye in the debate on Europe’s strategic autonomy.

More broadly, we can assume that the new geopolitical and security environment faced by Europe will create unprecedented opportunities to foster closer ties between Europe and Türkiye – first and foremost in the field of defence, but potentially also in many other political and economic spheres. The Ukrainian conflict and the evolution of US foreign policy under Trump might even lead to the emergence of two parallel but mutually reinforcing strategic autonomies, one led by Europe, the other by Türkiye.

Abbreviations

CFSP	<i>Common Foreign and Security Policy</i>
DG	<i>Directorate General</i>
EDF	<i>European Defence Fund</i>
EELV	<i>Les Écologistes Europe Écologie Les Verts (French green political party)</i>
EPC	<i>European Political Community</i>
EPF	<i>European Peace Facility</i>
FRONTEX	<i>European Border and Coast Guard Agency</i>
GMF	<i>German Marshall Fund of the United States</i>
GNA	<i>UN-recognised Libyan Government of National Unity</i>
IS	<i>Islamic State</i>
ISIS	<i>Islamic State of Iraq and Syria</i>
JCPOA	<i>Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Iran Nuclear Deal)</i>
LFI	<i>La France Insoumise (French left-wing populist party)</i>
LPM	<i>Military Programming Act</i>
MP	<i>Member of Parliament</i>
SSI	<i>Internal Security Service</i>
UAV	<i>Unmanned Aerial Vehicle</i>
YPG	<i>People's Defence Units</i>

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CATS Network. All CATS Network publications undergo an internal peer review process to uphold quality and accuracy.

The Centre for Applied Turkey Studies (CATS) at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP) in Berlin is funded by Stiftung Mercator and the Federal Foreign Office. CATS is the curator of CATS Network, an international network of think tanks and research institutions working on Turkey.

STIFTUNG
MERCATOR



Federal Foreign Office



This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0.

SWP Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs
Ludwigkirchplatz 3–4, 10719 Berlin
www.swp-berlin.org
www.cats-network.eu