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MACRON'S FRANCE IN THE WORLD: STRATEGIC CHALLENGES, AND A NARROW PATH

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Macron's France in the world: strategic challenges, and a narrow path

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One year after his unexpected victory in a puzzling presidential election in May 2017, France's Emmanuel Macron finds himself coping with a threatening strategic environment and has but a few tools to handle it. He has a vision and a team, but the international context is getting worse and domestic constraints are many. The task ahead consists of rethinking France's role in the world. This means redefining the message, the tools, as well as the means of French diplomacy and armed forces altogether.

1. The world according to Macron

Emmanuel Macron was elected after the strangest presidential election ever, since the French Fifth Republic began in 1958. Mainstream parties committed political suicide with American-style primary elections that proved unfitted for France. Two former presidents; Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, and three former prime ministers; Alain Juppé, François Fillon, and Manuel Valls, were defeated during the process, and most of the "Ancient world" – as the former political class is now referred to – was wiped away after the legislative elections in June. More interesting from an international point of view, was the fact that among the candidates, Macron was almost the only one not to adopt a euro-skeptical and Pro-Russian line. His closest competitors, namely Marine Le Pen, François Fillon and Jean-Luc Mélenchon, gathered more than 60% of the votes at the first round with a euro-skeptical and anti-NATO discourse, plus strong ties with Putin's Russia. This must be kept in mind for the years to come, even if Macron was eventually elected.

Macron's first diplomatic statements set the scene for his diplomacy in the making. France's diplomatic stance is also very much linked to its military capacity, as Macron pledged to restore French international influence.

Macron's first diplomatic statements

During his campaign, Macron pleaded for an "Independent, European and humanist" French power. The first element – independence – was not so surprising in a country whose Gaullist cult of the "French exception" remains strong. The second one – Europe – would have been a classic until recently, but sounded very brave in a political climate thriving with EU-bashing. The promise of a "humanist" power was more enigmatic. It refers to France's universalist tradition (the French Revolution and its Human Rights charter), but precise and concrete examples hardly come to mind : what is a "humanist power" supposed to do in front of the Syrian crisis, the refugee crisis, or to establish a dialogue with Trump, Putin or Erdogan?

Soon after he swore in, Macron made a series of speeches, elaborating on his international doctrine. Speaking to the French Ambassadors for their traditional yearly meeting in Paris, on 29th August 2017, he insisted on the need for France to develop a new public diplomacy, to talk "to everyone" and to reform several sectors of France's international action, especially in Africa. The speeches set the tone and gave the image of a new, young president whose foreign policy would defend Europe, multilateralism, and a liberal agenda on the world stage. Another speech at the 72nd United Nations (UN) General Assembly, on 20 September 2017, called for a "strong and responsible" multilateralism, while defending a liberal vision of international relations. At the Sorbonne University in Paris a few days later, the new President pleaded again in favour of Europe and tried to propose a new vision, while stressing the necessity to reform the system. His main proposals were to increase the convergence among the Europeans (essentially between France and Germany), to improve European defence, to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, and to increase taxes on carbon and GAFA.

In a much more polemical tone, he hinted in a written interview (Le Point, 30 August 2017) that he would "put an end to ten years of importation of neoconservative ideas in France". This triggered a debate among diplomats, journalists and experts. What did Emmanuel Macron mean exactly? Was he accusing his two predecessors, Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-12) and François Hollande (2012-17) of being French-style neoconservative?

President Macron debates the future of Europe with European leaders.
(Photo: European Parliament, Flickr CC BY).

What does a "French neocon" mean anyway? For the first time in a long time, a debate on the substance of France's diplomatic doctrine was launched.

Defence matters

Much more concrete and tense were Macron's first steps as army chief and head of France's defence. First, the recent military reviews (Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale, 2008, 2013) had left the country with a harsh debate on defence budget, and many questions on the possibility for France to maintain its rank as a global power. Substantial cuts in defence budget and personnel were planned before being partially suspended in the wake of the Paris and Nice terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016. When Macron took office, the need to increase military spending was commonly accepted by most of the French main political parties, for at least three reasons: 1) fighting against terrorism (including in the Middle East and Africa, Operation Chammal against Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) would be a costly and long-term effort; 2) NATO norms require the European allies to

spend at least 2% of their GDP for defence (France's is now about 1,8); and 3) France is engaged in many external operations, with more than 10.000 troops in external operations or overseas territories. This worldwide presence is a key element in France's claim to be a global power.

Macron decided not to keep the incumbent, seasoned and appreciated Ministry of Defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, but instead appointed him as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The first months of the new presidency were marked by some turbulence as far as military affairs are concerned. After the Chief of Staff, General Pierre de Villiers, expressed public concern on the military budget, President Macron castigated him in an unusually tough way. He resigned soon after the National Day on 14th July. The first Minister of Defence, whose office was renamed Ministry of Armed Forces, Sylvie Goulard, had also resigned on June 20th, after but a few weeks in charge.

Above all, many key dilemmas had to be dealt with, forming a long list of unsolved issues on the presidential and ministerial agendas. The expensive modernization of French deterrence must be launched in the coming months, leading to necessary budgetary arbitration. The return of the national service in France under a new form (universal – *i.e.* for men and women – National Service, or SNU), had been promised by Macron during his campaign, but its cost and modalities remained debated. The nature and scope of France's presence in Africa, the results of its Barkhane operation in Sahel against terrorism with G5 Sahel, with 4.500 French troops in 2018, are also at stake.

Emmanuel Macron's government – with Prime Minister Edouard Philippe and new Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly – decided in favour of a slight increase of the budget, which put an end to the downward trend for the first time since the end of the Cold War. Still, on the substance, more specific issues like the national service, the modernization of the nuclear arsenal or the future of French troops in Africa, remain to be settled.

"France is back"

France needs a clear new diplomatic message and a working military tool, all the more since the ambitions of the new president are high when it comes to the country's international role. Before his victory, Emmanuel Macron asked some advisers in what current international crises France could play a useful

role. Two issues were compulsory: Syria, where France had been marginalized after its previous adamant stance (2013-2017) that Assad's demise was a prerequisite for any negotiation, and Ukraine, a matter of security for the EU. But the room to manoeuvre was narrow. The Israel-Palestine dossier seemed to be too much a stalemate for France alone to help: the previous government had organized two conferences in Paris (June 2016 and January 2017), with no results and without the main protagonists. By contrast, Libya appeared to be a good test case for Paris to take some initiatives. Emmanuel Macron thus held two meetings in Paris, the first one on 29 July 2017 with Libyan Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj, General Khalifa Haftar, Head of Parliament Aguila Saleh, and Khaled al-Mishri, Head of the High Council of State, and the second one on 29 May 2018 that led to a road map, and the planning of elections in December 2018. On less structural issues, Macron did his best to be a deal-broker, so was the case when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri found himself a guest under constraint in Saudi Arabia in November 2017.

Finding a role, according to Emmanuel Macron, requires speaking to everyone, avoiding taking side in feuds between two friends, and not talking publicly about sensitive issues. Macron rebuffed criticism when he received Egypt's Marechal Abdel Fattah al-Sissi in Paris on 24 October 2017, or held a common news conference with Putin in Versailles, soon after his election. As Qatar and Saudi Arabia got engaged in a diplomatic crisis during the spring of 2017, France called for calm and restraint. When criticized for not having openly castigated a counterpart – especially Sissi – on human rights, Macron explained that the method would be counterproductive, and developed the case against patronizing or arrogant past Western attitudes obsessed with regime change. A pragmatic liberal approach thus seemed to him to be the real objective. How far could this be possible and efficient in the new international relations?

2. Uneasy lies the head: Bad news from the world

One of the major challenges to Macron's action came from the fact that the international stage quickly turned out to be very different from what was expected or hoped for in Paris. First, France found itself pretty much alone in its close circle (EU and NATO) after the Brexit referendum in June 2016, Trump's

surprising triumph in the U.S. in November 2016, and Merkel's narrow and difficult electoral victory in September 2017. Second, its eastern and southern strategic environment, already shaken by the Arab uprisings in 2011 and Putin's recent initiatives in 2008, 2014 and 2015, got further destabilized. Moreover, France's influence remains weak in emerging countries and markets, from Asia to South America, Central Asia or English-speaking Africa.

The close circle: in search of allies

There is little doubt that Emmanuel Macron's job would have been easier, had the "Remain"-camp won in the U.K., had Hillary Clinton been elected President of the United States, and had Angela Merkel got a free hand after the German elections. An illiberal Britain, an illiberal America, plus a timorous Germany paralyzed by a new coalition, the rise of Euroskeptic feelings and the recent refugee crisis, altogether make a difficult scenario for a new liberal europhile and multilateralism-friendly France.

Although Macron has been trying hard to keep the dialogue going with Trump, he cannot (and is not willing to) mask the growing transatlantic gaps between Paris and Washington. Over climate change and the 2015 Paris COP21 agreement, over the 2015 Iranian deal, free trade or the recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel, the two countries have been at bitter odds. Trump's invitation to Paris for the national day in 2017, as well as Macron's state visit to Washington on 23 April 2018, was apparently successful in terms of personal relations, as the two presidents hugged and flashed smiles. But political results did not live up to the promises of body language. After Trump's rejection of the Paris agreement on climate, Macron tweeted (in English) "Make the planet great again", a parody of Trump's electoral slogan. He considered Jerusalem's recognition as an "unfortunate [one] that France disapproves and that contravenes international law" and called the U.S. withdrawal from Iran deal a "mistake". Today the American alliance is put into question as Trump castigates his European allies, even calling the EU "an enemy", while playing dramatic rapprochement with Russia or meeting North Korea's Kim Jong-un. Macron's liberal project thus meets a substantial obstacle: the presence in Washington of an illiberal President, hostile to multilateralism.

The European context is hardly better. Eager to give European

Political results have not live up to the promises of body language between the two presidents. (Photo: Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, Flickr CC BY).

integration a fresh start and to provide the EU project with more political substance and ambitions, Emmanuel Macron finds himself pretty isolated. As already said, his more valuable partner (for historical, economic and political reasons), Germany, had its liberal Chancellor weakened by the refugee crisis and tight elections. Angela Merkel now has to adopt a more prudent line and cannot follow Macron's euro-enthusiasm without risking domestic consequences. Britain, the only European partner able to carry out large or difficult military operations with France, is not in situation to think strategically anymore before having found a way out from the Brexit conundrum. The Brexit was seen from Paris as a disaster and a real blow to the European construction. The political confusion in the country after the June 2017 elections makes London a more difficult partner for France. Willing to prevent any further temptation to leave the European ship, Paris first pleaded for a "hard" Brexit, so to prove that once a country leaves the EU, it cannot enjoy the benefits of it anymore. Still, the U.K. remains the best partner for France as far as defence and military interventions are concerned. Building an efficient European defence – a key priority for Macron – can

hardly be envisaged without Britain. And for now, Britain is too busy handling the Brexit situation to be interested in Macron's agenda.

The populist wave has long reached Central Europe, more recently Italy and even the German Ministry of Interior. Upcoming elections within the EU are at risk for the same reasons. For a French President who miraculously survived a shambolic election against far-right and far-left populist candidates, the new state of the EU is no good news.

Europe's strategic environment in crisis

Outside Europe, France has to cope with a problematic environment that once was considered secure and stable. On the Eastern front, Russia is all the more threatening since its new assertive and brutal strategy puts into question at least three pillars of the French strategy: 1) the security of the EU borders and its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP); 2) the unity of the EU itself; and 3) the political national unity in France, where growing pro-Russian discourses can be heard. In the south, the Mediterranean region is also of vital interest for France, whose cultural and social links with North Africa or Lebanon are dense. The Middle East has already been a powder keg for a long time now, and France paid the price for it, for instance in the eighties with hostage crises, attacks in Paris, or attacks against its military presence abroad (58 French military were killed in 1982 in Beirut). By contrast, North Africa was seen as a stable area, with everlasting political regimes. The sudden deterioration of the situation has several manifestations (revolution in Tunisia, stalemate in Algeria, fragility of the economic situation in Morocco), and puts at risk key partnerships, other French interests deeper in the South, as well as the ticklish relation of France with Islam.

After the end of the Cold War, the Eastern neighbourhood was considered "pacified", and the question was how to benefit from the "dividends of peace". On 11 July 2008 in Paris, Nicolas Sarkozy presented a new French White Book on defence and security, in which one could read that any conventional warfare, *i.e.* interstate military invasion, in the European strategic environment was highly unlikely. On August 8th, Russia invaded Georgia. A few weeks later, in September, the sub-prime crisis broke out, opening an era of financial turmoil and budgetary

uncertainty that would weigh heavily on European defence schemes. France and its European partners entered a new era. In 2014, as François Hollande was in charge, the annexation of Crimea and the destabilization of Eastern Ukraine showed that Russia was adopting a "hybrid" strategy, with new tools of information warfare. In September 2015, the Russian intervention in Syria established a de facto link between eastern and southern concerns. Between 2015 and the election of Emmanuel Macron in 2017, several developments confirmed the opening of a new strategic context, placing the new French administration in a very different situation from the one met by its predecessors.

First, the events in Georgia and Ukraine made it almost impossible to envisage their membership to NATO and the EU in the near future. This was not a major setback for France or its German partner, since both were reluctant to such an enlargement that would have led the West to bite off more than it can chew. But it was a new deal to take into account in the approach to European security. The EU neighbourhood policy, aiming at "fostering stabilisation, security and prosperity" in Eastern Europe and the southern neighbourhood, had to cope with the return of geopolitics and spheres of influence. Even more worrying was the fact that the "Putin style", made of authoritarian illiberal rule at home, and daring (and mostly unpunished) actions abroad, strangely became a kind of model for some within the EU itself. It is almost openly admired by several rulers, including in Slovakia and Hungary, and more generally in European extremist and/or populist parties. With several "putinites" in the club, the discussions on common strategy or external action were set to be troublesome. Macron, himself a target of Russian-inspired fake news during his electoral campaign, had to work with European partners whose loyalty to the European project in front of Russia could be put into question. An amazing image summarised the situation in August 2018, as Vladimir Putin attended as a guest star at the wedding of the far-rightist Austrian Foreign Minister, and danced with the bride, who happened to be the one officially representing the EU in the world that semester. France itself is not immune to such Putin-mania. Members of Parliament visited Crimea after its annexation, notably the very pro-Russian Thierry Mariani, in spite of strong official disapproval by the Ministry of Foreign

Affairs. Russian medias in French (Sputnik TV, Russia Today) are developing. Once seen as a problem solved, Russia is thus back at the top of the security agenda, playing havoc even among the French political class.

The situation in the Mediterranean area is different, but it is worrying too. The Arab uprisings in 2011 triggered several regime changes (Tunisia, Egypt), civil wars (Libya, Syria), and political tension all over the Arab world. As a key player in the Euro-Mediterranean agenda, Paris tried to relaunch a Mediterranean dialogue in 2008 under Sarkozy and still considers the region as a test of its influence. The passing away of several Arab leaders well known in Paris – Hassan II of Morocco and Hussain of Jordan in 1999, Yasser Arafat in 2004 – had already diminished France's influence. The overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt in 2011 also deprived Paris from long-serving and familiar (if not consensual or virtuous) partners. As Macron swore in, several parameters were difficult to handle. First came the fact that the Assad regime was about to win the civil war – or at least to survive it – with Russian support. This sounded as a major setback for former Hollande's foreign policy, but it was hardly conceivable to make a dramatic shift and embrace the perspective of resuming a normal dialogue with Damascus. Assad's "victory" and the rush of Syrian refugees abroad were also constraining elements, for Europe but also for Lebanon, France's protégé in the Middle East. Second, the stalemate in Libya, where France took a major responsibility in the 2011 regime change, was another issue where Macron had to fix past mistakes. Third, major commercial partners for France under Hollande underwent significant changes. Sissi's Egypt had to cope with growing domestic insecurity and economic problems, while the regime turned to be more and more brutal. A new Crown Prince, Mohammad Bin Salman, was appointed in Saudi Arabia in June 2017, with a reformist stance at home, and a hawkish policy abroad, supporting regime change in Iran and intensifying the war in Yemen. Fourth, the unstable or uncertain situation in North Africa is a risk for France, not only because of its various cultural and social interactions with the Southern rim of the Mediterranean, but also because it is an additional weakness when coping with the terrorist threat in Sahel.

Macron granted a great deal of importance and devoted a lot of time to the situation in North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa,

with several visits as a candidate and then as President. After his election, he went to Burkina-Faso, Ghana and Ivory Coast in November 2017, and later to Mauritania and Nigeria in July 2018. He also visited Morocco (June 2017), Algeria (December 2017) and Tunisia (January 2018). Still, the challenges for France remain the same: how to contribute to security in Sub-Saharan Africa with limited means? How to rethink the link with Africa after several political and ethical crises in the nineties and 2000s, including heavily criticized interventions in Rwanda and Ivory Coast, several speeches considered as mistakes (Sarkozy in Dakar in 2007), two major operations in 2013 in Mali and in Central African Republic, and a global debate about France's special post-colonial relationship – the famous "Françafrique" narrative? How to implement a new attitude towards North Africa, after several terrorist attacks in the country and after a serious deterioration of the French debate on Islam, including strange polemics about the muslim veiling or the permission to wear "Burkinis" on the French beaches, or heating controversies on "laïcité" (French-style laicism or secularism).

Out of reach? France and the emerging world

Europe and North America are key partners indeed, just as Eastern Europe, the South Mediterranean region and Sub-Saharan Africa are vital strategic environments. But most French decision-makers and analysts acknowledge that the battle for international influence now takes place under some other latitudes. The centrality of Asia and the Pacific Ocean, the growing importance of Central and South-America, or other emerging areas such as Central Asia, are of growing interest. The U.S. "Pivot" policy towards Asia announced by Barack Obama in 2009 sounded as a urgent reminder. But France's influence in such remote places remains historically weak.

Even General de Gaulle failed to provide the country with strong political clout in these remote places, in spite of his recognition of communist China in 1964, or a three-week trip to ten nations of South America in 1965. Only Jacques Chirac, with strategic partnerships signed with India and China in 1998, really made the effort to open the French diplomacy to non-Western grounds, without getting impressive results. Too little money to develop ambitious policies, too many influential big powers to compete with: France experiences difficulty in being recognized

as a local player in such remote places. Under Hollande, the then Defence minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced in 2012, at the Shangri La Dialogue in Singapore, that France would be "back" in Asia-Pacific as a "regional" power (and also as a neighbour, with overseas territories like La Réunion in the Indian Ocean, Tahiti and the French Polynesia or Nouvelle Calédonie in the South Pacific). But the statement was not taken seriously by the ASEAN countries, which rejected Paris's request to be associated to the ADMM+ group (ASEAN's Defence Minister's Meeting, enlarged to non-ASEAN countries, namely Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, ROK, Russian Federation, and the United States).

The equation remains the same today, and Emmanuel Macron's team admitted that Asia had not been central enough in his international relations program during the campaign. Although a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, France is not politically influent in Asia, or in Latin America. Its overseas territories in the Caribbean, the South Pacific and the Indian Ocean make France the second largest Exclusive Economic Zone in the world. But this is not enough to be a first rank power at the other end of the word. The Foreign Affairs department under Macron, as well as the Elysée's diplomatic team, are aware of the situation. In Asia for instance, Germany and other European partners are much more present than France in commercial exchanges. They are, too, on the diplomatic front. For instance, in 2016 Germany had 12 representatives to the ASEAN in Jakarta, France had only one. But in hard budgetary times, with the necessity to put some order in national finances first, reversing the trend or investing massively in such fields is simply not the priority.

3. What next? Rethinking France's power

Emmanuel Macron has set to rethink France's foreign policy, following a specific path: 1) restore the national budgetary balance to have more leeway in making decisions in international affairs; 2) rebuild Europe in order to make it an international strategic actor at last; and 3) with such tools restored, develop a new ambitious and global agenda for France's foreign policy. The most important obstacle comes from the fact that the first two steps will not depend on France and its government alone. The budgetary room to manoeuvre is linked to the international economy, the attitude of the main partners, and the reaction of

the French public to Macron's domestic reforms. This brings us back to the consequences of an illiberal American president, a shy Germany, the possible return of international protectionism and the rise of populism in Europe. Rebuilding Europe will depend on the state of the EU, and the possibility for France to defend the idea of a core group without being hampered by the illiberal regimes. Moving forward without Hungary or Slovakia can be envisaged. Doing it without Poland and Italy might prove actually more difficult. Developing Macron's ambition would require the rethinking of not only France's relations with its neighbours, but also its diplomatic tool, and the nature of its national interests.

Entering the world of modern diplomacy

State-centred France is probably not easy to convert to public, digital, network or "track II diplomacy". Some progress had been made in the recent years, though, especially as far as multilateral diplomacy was concerned. Formerly wary of UN diplomacy – Charles de Gaulle used to call the UN "Le Machin" or "the thing" – France now wants to act systematically in a UN framework. Its best diplomats are sent to serve in international organisations. And Emmanuel Macron considers the defence of multilateralism as his signature in foreign policy. Digital diplomacy has been developed too, with a multilingual and pretty successful website for the French ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the growing digitalisation of France's cultural diplomacy (including francophonie). But wielding more influence abroad and being able to convince its partners in Europe or elsewhere in the world, requires more. In August 2017, Macron hinted that he would promote the holding of international conferences in Paris, suggesting a possible conversion to "track II diplomacy", with the support of think tanks and universities. Unfortunately, this foreign policy objective will depend on the development of the academic system and the French think thanks.

Macron's will to modernize France's foreign policy is undeniable. But it requires more reforms to be implemented upstream. So far, foreign policy analysis and even international relations as a whole are not popular within the French academic research. Think tanks of critical size and with sufficient international calibre are but a few. Peer competitors to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Chatham House and the Royal

United Services Institute, or the German foundations and think tanks, are hard to find. The ministries of Defence and Foreign Affairs simply cannot organize it all, in a purely institutional and state-centred way. Macron's vision implies that France be able to be a serious competitor for hybrid warfare, storytelling, and battle for influence, ideas and norms. The endeavour goes much beyond the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

President Macron launching a new multilateral initiative at the margins of the UN General Assembly. (Photo: United Nations Photo, Flickr CC BY).

Bringing the national interest back in

Developing such tools also implies that France's interests be well defined. If values and interests were linked in a same rethoric in the Gaullist foreign policy narrative, the "interests" component has almost vanished in the recent years. A new discourse stressing on the unselfish defence of universal values has replaced it. Very tellingly, as France's military operation in

Mali started to prove a success in 2013, President Hollande stated that France had "a special responsibility, not because of French interests in Mali – there is none of the sort – but because it is France, and France had the capacity to intervene". In other words, there was no specific reason for France to launch the large-scale Serval Operation in Mali, other than altruism. In a "brave new world", in the illusion of the "unipolar moment" (1990-92), or in a world characterized by collective security, such a narrative would be tenable. It is not anymore in a more dangerous world.

What kind of power does France want to be? What are its interests in the transatlantic partnership, in the EU, in Eastern Europe, in North Africa, in Sub-Saharan Africa and in Asia? In the Syrian civil war, in Libya, in the Palestinian issue, in the Mediterranean refugee crisis and in the evolution of various terrorist movements? Easy answers are available in store: France promotes international security and peace, fights against terror and supports the rule of international law. Macron added a more ambitious and adventurous overlay: France defends Europe because it cannot exist and count alone anymore in the international competition, France supports multilateralism because the return to national egoisms and absence of dialogue might mean war and France promotes liberalism for the same reasons. This framework must now be elaborated and applied to specific regional issues. Its interest-based logic must be recognized.

For instance, France cannot afford a new destabilization of North Africa because several millions of its citizens have familial links there. It cannot let Putin unravel the EU but cannot oppose it alone. France's interest would be that there is no second Donald Trump mandate, but it is up to the American people to deal with that. France should keep a military presence in Africa, but, running short of resources, it must make it multilateral with the support of the Africans and other European armies. France must remain a player in the Middle-East game but dying for Syria might not be a priority.

Foreign policy and strategy are made of objectives and red lines. It is time for Macron to recognize it and add that new milestone to the modernization of France's international action.

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