

Macron's France on Gaullism vector

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Since the end of 2023, French policy towards the Ukrainian conflict has been significantly intensified. At the same time, Paris's diplomacy on the South Caucasus regional track was revitalized. Moreover, in both cases, there were signs that Paris was abandoning the previous approaches of the Fifth Republic to the problems of these regions.

If in January 2023 President Emmanuel Macron was one of the few Western leaders who insisted on the need for dialogue with Moscow and consideration of its interests in the context of the Ukrainian issue, the current course of Paris is absolutely dissonant with its previous position. In fact, Macron has become the first leader in the Western coalition to openly declare that his country is ready to take direct part in the Ukrainian war. These words are supported by data on the intensive deployment of French formations in Romania and, indeed, in Ukraine itself. The other question is what their tasks will be: protection Odessa's port infrastructures, sabotage operations against the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Moldova, or the function of barrier troops, as Russian media sources constantly keep talking about. Whatever their purpose, French troops in Ukraine are a precedent for direct immediate intervention by a NATO member state in a war. Moreover, it is the FR that at this stage is consistently lobbying European structures for the narrative of increasing military and financial support to Kiev in order to create the necessary conditions for the “*second counter-offensive campaign*” announced by Zelensky.

On the South Caucasus track, the breakdown of Paris's previous approaches can be seen first and foremost in the Fifth Republic's unbalanced relations with the countries of the region. While until recently France followed a policy of balanced cooperation with the South Caucasus, this approach is now undergoing a serious transformation. France's special relations with Armenia and Yerevan's membership in the Francophonie Club, which are based on objective historical circumstances, have not prevented Paris from maintaining good relations with both Georgia and Azerbaijan for three decades. In the case of the latter, the main platform for interaction and close ties has been the economic sphere and, especially, the participation of large French capital in the energy and raw materials consortia in the AzR. The mere participation of the French energy giant *Total* in the projects of exploration, production and export of Azerbaijani oil and gas provided the necessary extensive resource of mutual loyalty, sufficient to neutralize the “risks” for Baku from the steadily warming relations between Paris and Yerevan. Azerbaijan, in turn, through economic lobbying in France, successfully neutralized the dangers of transforming FR–RA relations into something more significant than just cultural and historical proximity and mutual sympathy of societies and peoples. Moreover, in this context, Baku actively used a wide range of tools to influence Paris through European structures and the West as a whole, quite soberly assessing the limitations of France's ability to disrupt the overall US–Brussels strategy on the problems of the South Caucasus.

And yet, in a certain sense, this breakdown is already being observed. Another question is to what extent Paris is driven by its own initiative unbalancing its relations with Yerevan and

Baku, and whether the attempt of a cardinal military-political rapprochement with Armenia that is demonstrating is not just a fragment of the game of the Anglo-Saxons dominating NATO to squeeze the RF out of the South Caucasus? After all, even considering such logic of calculated geopolitical processes, Paris must be ready to spoil its relations with both Baku and Ankara. The French authorities are hardly unaware of this. And yet, France is ready to play the role it has assumed. This may mean that the expectations of Macron and his government from the policy of supporting Armenia are more significant than the costs of a new wave of political and diplomatic crisis in relations with Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Currently, the signs of this crisis are already visible in the aggressive rhetoric of the parties, in diplomatic scandals with the expulsion of embassy officials and “spy stories”. At the same time, the events indicate that the predictions of some analysts about the imminent easing of tensions in relations between Paris and Baku due to the great importance of business interests may not come true.

Due to a number of factors, the stereotype about the dominance of Paris’s economic interests in Absheron in the set of goals of the South Caucasus policy is objectively exaggerated, just as the potential of the AzR to create global problems for French companies is overestimated. The private interests of the oil and gas giant *Total* and related financial and political groups in France undoubtedly have a great influence on the policy of official Paris. However, the significance and functions of *Total* in the context of the foreign policy doctrine of the Fifth Republic cannot be more significant than the role of the notorious French oil company *Elf*, which once represented the interests of French capital in West Africa. This company was a conduit for Paris's interests in the Sahel countries and, together with French intelligence, took steps to extend the Fifth Republic’s influence over local political regimes. Subsequently, *Elf* was later found to be not only pursuing its own independent policy in Africa, but also attempting to control the political authorities in Paris through bribery, corrupt deals and illegal campaign financing. After two decades of violence, more than 40 members of *Elf’s management team* were arrested and sentenced to long prison terms. The company itself was liquidated, and its assets were merged with the company *Total Fina* and was renamed into *Total* in 2003. As a result of this transformation, France has repeatedly tightened the mechanisms of state control over *Total* and other transnational giants, making their private interests completely dependent on the country's political doctrine and minimizing the possibility of lobbying for views that diverge from the general line of Paris.

In this context, President Macron’s increasing policy of “infiltration” into Armenia with the prospect of military-political patronage acquires the character of confident steps, unencumbered by the fear of falling under AzR’s economic blackmail and the pressure from its own corporate interests. On the other hand, given the tensions between Paris and Baku in the political and diplomatic level, it can be assumed that such costs are acceptable for France and, at least in this form, they will not be able to prevent the Fifth Republic from trying to implement some new plans regarding Armenia.

Thus, the cardinal activation of Paris in the two mentioned directions is obvious, as well as the interconnection of these almost synchronous geopolitical undertakings. In order to understand their goals, we should turn to another important geopolitical event for France,

the historical significance of which remained in the shadow of current events in the Middle East and Ukraine.

It is the final and irreversible liquidation of the so-called *Fransafrik* project, the last act of which was the withdrawal of the French military contingent from Niger in the fall of 2023, following the coup d'état that took place there. Even before that, in just 4 years, the Sahel and West Africa, traditionally considered the domain of the French Republic, had witnessed 7 military coups that overthrew regimes that had worked closely with Paris. Thus, the vestiges of France's post-colonial patronage in Africa, the architecture of which was laid down in the 1960s by Jacques Foccart, De Gaulle's advisor, the “gray cardinal” of the Republic, were finally removed from Paris's geopolitical agenda.

Overall, France was a long way from such an outcome. And the reasons for this outcome lie in the devaluation of the very idea of French neocolonialism, as “*a necessary humane concept saving the peripheries of the former empire from destruction*”. And also in the indifference of French society, unwilling to consider African patronage in the context of the French nation's heritage of power. On the other hand, the loss of the Sahel and West Africa as a whole was inevitable, given Paris's entrenched methods of “nurturing” and supporting “Franco-African” regimes and bureaucracies, as well as its inability to contain the onslaught of Chinese capital that Beijing has been “pouring” into Africa over the past decade.

The narrative of Macron's guilt in the abandonment of “French Africa” to the Chinese, British and Russians is now very popular in the political life of the Fifth Republic, especially among right-wing radicals. Meanwhile, it seems that the current head of the French Republic is only to blame for the fact that during his presidential term the irreversible process of deactivating French influence on the black continent came to an end. The Africa policy of Sarkozy and Hollande, who tried to stop the process of devaluation of Paris' authority in the Sahel through violent intervention, in fact only accelerated the inevitable collapse of the neo-colonial architecture of Foccart, the wreckage of which neither Macron nor any other leader could construct even a vague resemblance of *Fransafrik*. The first – Sarkozy – stood at the head of the coalition that destroyed Gaddafi's Libya and paved the way for the Islamization of the idea of fighting the dictatorial regimes of the Sahel, “crowned” by Paris. The second – Hollande – aggravated the conflict between the black inhabitants of the Sahel and parts of the Arab-speaking tribes by intervening in Côte d'Ivoire and Mali, accelerating the fragmentation and de facto disintegration of the sovereign subjects of French Africa.

Under these conditions, the Macron government had no choice but to recognize the failure of France's “care” over its Sahelian subjects and to comply with the Niger junta's ultimatum to withdraw its military presence in the country.

The failure of Africa thus fell entirely on Macron's shoulders, but on the whole his political reputation has been saved by the fact that French society has become less tolerant of the country's foreign involvement, thanks largely to the Ukrainian war that has devastated Europe. The loss of French Africa is certainly a severe blow to Paris, which has lost not only a cheap resource base and a huge market of 300 million people, but also a convenient ground for “barracks maintenance” and the testing of its military formations for use in the interests of the Republic beyond its immediate borders. “The French Foreign Legion, a form of armed

force unique in world practice, which since its creation in 1831 has successfully carried out for Paris the tasks of colonizing territories in Africa, North America, Southeast Asia, in the Franco-Prussian wars, and played a major role for the Fourth Republic during the two world wars, now finds itself in the status of an “*army on wheels*”. Traditionally, the Legion cannot be stationed on French territory on a long-term basis. Its equipment and legal status do not allow it either. Something should be done with this military unit, and this task is no less important for Macron than the problem of reorganizing French capital in Africa, revising France's foreign policy doctrine, and a program of steps to restore the country's image in the world.

In this regard, it should be noted that the ironic and often sarcastic remarks of Paris's international opponents regarding the “Sahelian shame” and Macron's “Napoleonic” aspirations are, to put it mildly, dissonant. The French leader's actions are driven by the objective need to deal with the “African heritage” and to find optimal solutions to compensate for France's image, material and political losses in the global African debacle. In this sense, the intensification of France's involvement in problematic regions is linked to the need to maintain both internal balance and equilibrium in the external system of coordinates, where the Fifth Republic is in danger of losing its powerful voice in the run-up to the new global world order.

The metamorphosis of the behavioral line of the “soft” Macron and his suddenly activated militaristic rhetoric should hardly be seen through the prism of the trivial personal ambitions of the French leader, who has suddenly “fallen ill” with a Napoleon complex. Rather, it is an attempt to appeal to a kind of Gaullism dictated by the threat of losing the (national) idea of power. A conceptual line in which the country's independent choice and path are in no way and under no circumstances dependent on the geopolitical conjuncture and the pressure of allies and enemies. At first glance, Macron and the elites behind him are resorting to radicalizing their positions on Russia, but in fact the main purpose of such a maximalist position is Paris' demand from its NATO allies for a larger platform for the realization of France's geopolitical ambitions and a foothold in certain regional locations to compensate for the “African loss”. In fact, this loss was largely made possible by the destructive penetration of British capital into the French fiefdom, as well as by the weakening of U.S. support for Paris to neutralize the expanding Chinese influence on the African continent. And finally, as a result of Washington's burning of the “Islamic barrel”, a policy blindly followed by the Sarkozy and Hollande governments.

Another question is whether Emmanuel Macron's personal qualities and political resources are up to the high bar set by the allies. It is not clear whether the French Legion will actually be able to provide Paris with a sufficient share of the “Ukrainian pie”, and whether it will be able to gain a foothold in Armenia in the future, as many analysts predict. After all, the course of events depends not only on Macron's team and the French president himself, but also on a number of global geopolitical factors. The bottom line, however, is that the Fifth Republic requires a new geopolitical niche for itself. And it is inclined to see the turbulent world stage not only as a time of loss, as has happened in the Sahel, but also as a window of opportunity that should not be missed before it slams shut.

The contours of the new French doctrine, aimed at expanding its influence, are already clear: Mediterranean – Black Sea – South Caucasus - Iran - India In this vast geographical area, Paris envisages realizing its ambitions for power, resources, markets and military presence. This is the most attractive space for revival of the idea of French power, even if it becomes a tool in the policy of the Washington-London nexus, and even if the French legionnaires serve as landsknechts for the global Anglo-Saxon doctrine of the liberal world order. This will hardly prevent Paris from declaring that it is driven solely by its own interests and autonomy, as Charles de Gaulle bequeathed to France.