



## Viewpoint from Paris

Photo: Denys Kolesnyk



# France Adopts New National Strategic Review

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 became a turning point

for European security priorities and became a source of discomfort for many in the West who had tried to downplay the Russian threat. Some even paid for their incorrect assessments of the situation with their posts. For instance, General Éric Vidaud - Head of the French Military Intelligence (Direction du Renseignement Militaire - DRM) – was discharged from his position due to “shortcomings in the assessment of the war in Ukraine”, only seven months after being appointed.

The invasion also brought more uncertainty to the defence climate in Europe. The French national intelligence capabilities as well as approaches towards the region have run contrary to the US' assessment prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and afterwards it became necessary for France to adapt to the new reality.

The Strategic Update (Actualisation Stratégique), published in January 2021, is one of the key French doctrinal documents that had to be urgently reviewed. Already on 9 November 2022, France's President Emmanuel Macron unveiled the new National Strategic Review (NSR) while traveling to Toulon – a southern city hosting a French Naval base.

The new document replaced the Strategic Update of 2021, which had been an attempt to amend the initial Strategic Review of Defence and National Security (SRDNS), published in 2017 - some five months after Macron acceded to the Élysée Palace.

Contrary to its predecessors, the new document was drafted in haste and despite the pressing need to review France's approach towards European security, and especially the Russian threat, the result seems to be quite modest.

The 60-page document is divided into three parts, with the last one proposing 10 strategic objectives. It acknowledges the “major shift in strategy”, provoked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and takes note of “moving from a latent competition to an open confrontation, on the part of Russia and, increasingly, to greater competition with the People Republic of China”, thus highlighting the importance of the Russian threat. The general thread of the document, however, is the confirmation of assumptions and trends identified in the 2017 and 2021 editions. Among France's security priorities it is unsurprising to find the “strategic autonomy” that is defined as a “prerequisite for pro-

tecting our fundamental interests”. Alongside this, the document notes that the freedom to act and protection of France's fundamental interests should be ensured, above all, by the “credibility of nuclear deterrence”. Even though this statement only follows the general logic of Paris, nuclear issues are getting higher on the agenda, especially given that the NSR 2022 notes “Russia's use of nuclear rhetoric as an offensive (not defensive) device in support of the invasion of Ukraine has the potential to undermine strategic equilibrium and, in the longer term, to intensify proliferation”.

The document also notes that the “hybrid strategies” have shown their impact. Yet again, it is unsurprising to see that the NSR 2022 mentions Africa, where France continues to suffer from the Russian hostile actions in cyber and information spheres, instigating anti-French sentiment among the local populations, especially in Mali and the Central African Republic. Therefore, the document goes further and acknowledges something new – the “strategic function of influence” that “aims to promote and defend the interests and values of France” and is considered, by the document, to be “an essential part of the expression of power”. It is worth noting that France has made some progress in terms of addressing the foreign malign influence on French soil, among other things by creating the Viginum anti-disinformation agency, which aims to protect the country from foreign cyber and influence operations. In order to act abroad, the Military Doctrine for Information Warfare (Doctrine militaire de lutte informatique d'influence – L2I) was unveiled last year.

The manipulation of information (the preferred term in France for ‘disinformation’) is mentioned several times in the document, and reflects France's increased awareness of the problem since 2017. The fight against disinformation became an important issue for Paris, especially given the vulnerabilities of French society. Thus, the NSR 2022 advances the idea that the French Republic has to have a “wide range of response options, beyond public denunciation of perpetrators, as happens with cyber attacks”.

However, in general terms, the document seems a bit less solid than its 2017 predecessor and doesn't provide much compared to the 2021 Strategic Update. Yet, given the rapidly changing security environment on the European continent, and the rest of the world, we may come to expect the publication of such documents every year or two to keep pace with evolving threats.