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The French EU Presidency and Upcoming Elections in a Fragile International Context

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Abstract

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France has assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU since 1 January 2022, following Slovenia's term. In a speech delivered on 9 December 2020, French President Emmanuel Macron underlined the necessity for a "European response" in facing both health and economic challenges, the rise of aggressive powers, climate change and global warming.

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[“We should move from a Europe of cooperation within our borders to a Europe powerful in the world, fully sovereign, free to make decisions, and master of its destiny”](#), asserted Macron, envisaging the promotion of European shared values and vision based on the protection of human rights, democracy and open multilateralism. [“Strategic autonomy”](#) has been one of Macron’s main principles, in addition to a common European debt on the economic side, the aim to reach carbon neutrality in ecological affairs, and the promotion of an EU common military budget on defense. In the context of the conflict in Ukraine, the spreading of the Omicron COVID-19 variant, and China’s blockade on Lithuanian exports, Macron’s aim has been to strengthen the EU’s influence on the international scene, especially by enhancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

This EIAS Policy Brief analyzes France’s EU Presidency as regards economic and security policies, especially in view of the upcoming April 2022 presidential election. While economics, migrations and strategic independence have been put forward as the French presidency’s main pillars, Macron is also in need to address the EU’s external affairs, by maintaining a line of communication with Putin and other key actors in the context of the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine, but also for instance in view of the developments in [Myanmar](#), [Afghanistan](#), or more recently in Kazakhstan. Indeed, while Macron’s main priority remains to deal with the Ukrainian crisis, the Indo-Pacific is still a key aspect on his agenda, as illustrated by the Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific which took place in Paris on 22 February 2022.

Strengthening the EU’s Strategic Autonomy

Beyond economic and migration policies, Macron is calling for EU “strategic autonomy”. This concept has increasingly gained traction at the [regional level](#) over the past few years. It was initially used to refer to [military and political disengagement from the US](#). However, since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, the notion has widened to include economic and technological spheres. Recently, EU leaders have begun to [question Europe’s reliance on NATO](#), especially after Donald Trump’s presidency and the AUKUS crisis going against French and European interests. Instead, France has been insisting on the EU to pursue military autonomy, guaranteeing an independent and coordinated security policy distinct from US’ influence.

On 13 and 14 January 2022, the [Gymnich](#) Informal Meeting of the Foreign Ministers reaffirmed EU member states’ solidarity with Lithuania and perspectives towards a common defense. The [“Strategic Compass”](#) White Paper provides the framework for a joint analysis of

global upheavals and threats facing the EU, envisaging its adoption by the European Council on 24 and 25 March 2022. Denouncing “[diplomatic and economic pressure from Beijing](#)”, they also stressed the importance for the EU to have the required means at hand to combat all forms of economic pressure and protect their sovereignty. As a result, the European Commission warned against the last resort use of the “[Anti-Coercion Instrument](#)” that had been presented in December 2021. The latter instrument was adopted in response to growing concerns over economic coercion by other powers. Nevertheless, China’s [blockade of Lithuanian trade](#) and the crisis in Ukraine have further highlighted the EU’s economic reliance on global supply chains. This expedited the push for a marked strategic shift aimed at reducing the reliance on external forces and partners, further investing in innovative technologies.

Impacts of France’s Internal Affairs on the EU Presidency

On 4 March 2022, Emmanuel Macron declared his candidature in seeking a second mandate through the French [regional newspapers](#). Indeed, in April 2022, French voters will be heading to the polls to elect their new president; the first round of which will be held on [10 April 2022](#), and the second subsequently on 24 April 2022. The legislative elections will also come up shortly in June 2022. This implies that the French EU Presidency is not only a crucial part of the electoral campaign, but also a chance for Macron to appeal to his domestic audience. As one of the most [pro-European among the twelve official candidates](#), Macron’s success will partly depend on his EU Presidency and ability to convince French citizens of the benefits of the EU and his global and internal leadership capabilities. Macron has been [pressured](#), on the one hand over his supposedly too lax approach towards immigration, by his center-right and far-right rivals – Valérie Pécresse, Marine Le Pen and Eric Zemmour –, and on the other hand over the lack of responses to socioeconomic inequalities and the climate crisis, by his left-side opponents – Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Yannick Jadot and Anne Hidalgo. However, the developments in Ukraine are likely to drastically impact the campaign, with the crisis shifting people’s attention away from the political debate.

In the Ukrainian case, France has taken the leadership on the European side and Emmanuel Macron has been playing [an intermediary role](#) between Presidents Volodymyr Zelensky and Vladimir Putin. On the internal side, opposition leaders and candidates to the presidential election have not been hesitating to target Macron’s stands, for instance denouncing the lack of outcomes following his meeting with Putin in Moscow. Consequently, candidates have rescheduled their events and meetings to highlight their condemnation of the Kremlin’s actions. External affairs are constitutionally part of the President’s “preserved area”, the crisis has thus become a cornerstone of the political campaign and could have a huge impact on the polling results. Additionally, [the end of the “Barkhane” operation](#), following the withdrawal of armed forces in the Sahel region, was announced during [the EU-African Union Summit](#) held on 17 and 18 February 2022 in Brussels. The French President will therefore be judged

on his interventions on the international scene, his management of foreign affairs and crises. Should he lose the election, which seems highly unlikely given [the latest polls](#), France could have a new head of state, entailing a possible political shift at the EU level.

External Action in an Unstable Context

Meanwhile, the EU has been confronted with genuine and direct [security challenges](#), especially the Russian invasion in Ukraine. While China was absent from the former Indo-Pacific Forum, the EU has yet agreed to [hold a common EU-China summit](#) on 1 April 2022. Additionally, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and Xi Jinping [have just met](#) virtually on 8 March 2022, trying to find a diplomatic answer to the Ukrainian crisis, dealing peculiarly with the issue of humanitarian actions, as well as the broader EU-China relationship which is key. China declared the following day the sending of [humanitarian aid to Ukraine](#). To another extent, while the international community was skeptical, some countries boycotting the opening ceremony of the Beijing Winter Olympics, and the European Parliament adopting [a resolution](#) with regard to Hong Kong, Macron was on the contrary unwilling to “[politicize](#)” the event.

In this context, the EU’s Global Gateway announced in 2021 is a powerful tool for Macron to project his “strategic autonomy”. This updated version of the 2018 [EU global connectivity strategy](#) has been framed – even though not in official terms – as a response and an alternative to Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Global Gateway envisions boosting connections within Europe, as well as engaging global partners to “[promote sustainable connectivity investments](#)”. It could serve to counterbalance China’s heavyweight [infrastructures and soft power investments](#) in Central Asia, Africa, or the Balkans. However, in order to realize the EU’s political and economic ambitions, France will need [Germany on board](#). The German industry has nevertheless been quite [critical regarding Lithuania’s defiance towards Beijing](#) and lobbying against decoupling from China; while France has not been very outspoken on the issue, claiming that the EU should [pursue any trade law](#) violation through the WTO. France and Germany appear to have [diverging priorities](#), especially in the realm of trade, in European and foreign affairs; with France focusing mainly on security and nuclear matters, whilst Germany largely favoring renewable energy.

Focus on the Indo-Pacific Strategy in the Context of War in Ukraine

Nevertheless, while the world is wondering about the conflict declared by [Vladimir Putin at the frontiers of Europe](#), Asia is still a key geopolitical region for the EU, lastly illustrated by the Indo-Pacific Forum held on 22 February 2022 in Paris. Indeed, even though Russia started

a war on the “Old Continent”, experts have also underlined [the potential risks](#) entailed in the South China Sea or for Taiwan.

Paris hosted the ministerial [27+30 Forum](#) between the EU and Indo-Pacific countries to promote the [EU’s Global Gateway](#), reinforce their presence and strengthen their strategic ties. At this occasion, the [EU’s Ministers](#) for Foreign Affairs unanimously condemned Russia for their acts of aggression and declaration of war. The crisis has also illustrated the EU’s ability to unite on the economic, trade and financial [measures](#) implemented to sanction Russia.

In such a context echoing Europe’s darkest times, EU member states together with Indo-Pacific representatives [restated their commitment](#) to the preservation of peace and security in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, as well as the promotion of alliances based on mutual trust and respect, rules of international law and democratic values. The main themes discussed were security and defense, connectivity and digital sovereignty, climate change and health, as well as the preservation of biodiversity and oceans. The emphasis has especially been put on the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), the [Paris Agreement](#) on climate change and the [Convention of Biological Diversity](#) (CBD). In a nutshell, the latter Forum was an opportunity for Emmanuel Macron to highlight France’s key position on the strategic Indo-Pacific scene, in the context of the French EU Presidency and national presidential campaign, disturbed by the current geopolitical order.

As a whole, one has to keep an eye on the EU Presidency as much as the presidential campaign and election to grasp France’s and the EU’s main priorities. In this unprecedented context, internal, regional and international concerns are perhaps more than ever before closely intertwined. What will be the results of the presidential election, but also of the following legislative elections? Will Macron get the chance to continue to pursue his EU and foreign policies? Moreover, to which extent will the conflict in Ukraine impact the world, and especially EU-Indo-Pacific relations? Answers will come in the short, medium and long terms through the polls, but also through how the EU’s strategic alliances will be redefined.

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