The French Presidential Election 2022: Irreconcilable Clash between World Views and Mediterranean Perspectives?

Jean-François Daguzan
Vice-President
Institut Choiseul
Research Fellow
Fondation pour la recherche stratégique (FRS)

A presidential election is a mirror of the worldviews within a country. In principle, it reflects the candidates’ thinking and, sometimes, their non-thinking. From 1965 (first election of the President of the Republic by direct universal suffrage) to 2017 (Emmanuel Macron’s first electoral win), the French vision of international relations and defence was based on classic positions: On the far right, an anti-communist and anti-Atlanticist position based on a narrow sovereignism. In the centre, an Atlanticist and European vision. On the left, socialists defending a Europeanism with a touch of anti-Atlanticism – but not too much – combined with a vision of solidarity and anti-colonialism vis-à-vis the Third World; the communists, globally aligned with Moscow; and finally, the far left, in its variants, at once anti-capitalist, anti-Stalinist, internationalist and Third-Worldist. In the middle, Gaullism defended a strong anti-Atlanticism under De Gaulle, eventually moderated, accompanied by a marked pro-Arab, pro-African approach and a rapprochement with Maoist China. National independence was the watchword of the moment, along with the somewhat obsessive term of France’s “rank” among nations (clearly one of the very first).1

The governing left generally endorsed this model (with nuclear power).2 Chirac’s opposition to the United States during the Iraq War in 2003 did not change the substance. Of course, no one in France (or elsewhere) gets elected on foreign policy, but the vision of the different candidates provides a good idea of their respective ideological positions.

The arrival of Emmanuel Macron in office consecrated the collapse of the traditional parties. In two elections, those who had ruled France since 1958 – the Republicans (LR) and the Socialist Party (PS) – were crushed.

In this year of 2022, marked by the return of war to Europe, it is useful to study the world view of the French political elite. For a long time, France enjoyed an aura that allowed it to influence world affairs more than others. Does this claimed position still make sense and for whom?

Two Presidents before Macron: Between Attempted Rupture and Continuity

Nicolas Sarkozy: Atlanticism and the Mediterranean, “Mother of Battles”

Nicolas Sarkozy’s foreign policy was characterized by a rapprochement with the United States to compensate for the period of “glaciation” created by the opposition to the Iraq war under Jacques Chirac. But Sarkozy’s real “revolution” was to focus his mandate on the Mediterranean as the new centre of the world. In his Toulon speech of 7 February 2007, the candidate laid the foundations for a “Mediterranean Union.”3

In principle, it was intended to replace the traditional

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2 See Bozo, Frédéric, La politique étrangère de la France depuis 1945, Champs histoire, Paris, 2012.
3 Complete text at www.vie-publique.fr/discours/165425-declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-ministre-de-linterieur-et-de-lamena.
“Arab policy of France.” “Here we will win everything or lose everything,” dramatized President Sarkozy in his speech in Tangier on 23 October 2007. Unrealistic in its conception and accompanied by diplomatic errors, the ambitious proposal of the beginning gave birth to a mouse.4 Finally, Sarkozy, who did not take the measure of the “Arab Spring,” engaged without foresight in a war in Libya leading to chaos there and in the Sahel. His only great success in foreign policy was to mobilize the European Union’s concerted response to the 2008 financial crisis, a movement he led together with Angela Merkel.

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François Hollande: Terrorism as a Horizon

The Socialist candidate was very classical in his proposals: support major global governance around the G20; support a World Environment Organization; help developing countries through multilateralism; reform the UN; put an end to “FrançAfrique”;5 relaunch the concept of Francophonie, or the French-speaking world; withdraw forces from Afghanistan; refocus NATO on security; support peace and the recognition of a Palestinian state; and fight against terrorism (points 57 to 60).6 All the foreign policy issues were there, but not one was fleshed out. A minimum commitment accompanied the Mediterranean: “to develop links with the countries of the southern shore of the Mediterranean on the basis of an economic, democratic and cultural project” (pt. 58.1). The terrorist attacks and the expansion of Daesh made a deeper mark than the entire Hollande quinquennium. The war in Mali, the intervention in Iraq and then in Syria as well, extended to the all-out fight against terrorism, were the consequences.

Emmanuel Macron 2017: Europe! What Kind of Europe?

Candidate Macron’s 2017 manifesto only spoke of Europe.7 In his campaign programme of the time, the Mediterranean was not present but Turkey was: “The Maghreb and Africa are our preferential partners. Our responsibilities require us to multiply the channels of dialogue with other partners. With Russia, Turkey or the countries of the Middle East and the Gulf (…). And it also stated that: “(…) Our country must regain its place in the Middle East, in particular to assist in the resolution of the Syrian crisis. It will remain committed in Lebanon.”8

Throughout his five-year term, the Head of State’s Mediterranean thinking was difficult to decipher. As on the national level, Macron sought to go beyond institutional frameworks to address the people. He also warned of latent threats (Turkey, Russia and, to a certain extent, China).

In 2019, the Élysée attempted to revive the process through a “Summit of the Two Shores.” Blocked in the East, France once again focused on the Western Mediterranean, drawing inspiration from the current 5+5 dialogue but in a more inclusive manner.9 This conference, conceived around consensual civil themes developed by 100 designated personalities, only met with a polite echo in the South and East.

On 13 July 2020, before the Armed Forces, the President of the Republic put forth the idea of a proactive Mediterranean policy:

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5 Term often used to qualify the unhealthy relations between Francophone African countries and their former colonizer. Ex: VerschaVe, François-Xavier, Françafrique, le plus long scandale de la République, Stock, Paris, 2003.
“The Mediterranean theatre is another priority for us (...). Moreover, it is a crucial issue for Europe today and tomorrow because this common sea is a bridge between Europe and areas of tension that are constantly intensifying. [...] This is why I call for the development of a genuine European policy for the Mediterranean.” (...)

“The Mediterranean area will be the challenge for the coming years” (...) “The Mediterranean cannot build a lasting peace without us, we cannot accept that our future be built by other powers.” 10 In this speech, on the one hand, the Turkish (but also Russian) question was underlying; on the other hand, Europe, and no longer an empirical entity, became the driving force of recovery. The President stated at the Lugano Forum that the Mediterranean was in crisis. This crisis was expressed in four areas: religious (rise of violent radical extremism), demographic (illegal migration), energy (fight for off-shore), and political (ambition for new powers). In response, Emmanuel Macron proposed a new approach: the "reinvention of multilateralism." 11

Despite the energy deployed, Emmanuel Macron’s efforts have failed so far: neither multilateral attempts, nor the individual dossiers (Libya, Lebanon, Sahel, Indo-Pacific, etc.) have met with success. 12

The Mediterranean, which was not very present in 2017, was entirely absent in 2022. The war in Ukraine became the central element of discourse

Emmanuel Macron won the presidential election with 58.55% of the votes.

The Unsuccessful Candidates: Convergences and Divergences

Marine Le Pen: Measured Anti-Atlanticism and Anti-Europeanism

The National Rally (RN) candidate, who reached the second round and lost, with 41.45% of the votes, was not very vocal on international relations. A few lines were devoted to defence (budget increase). She joined the candidate of La France Insoumise (LFI) in proposing to "strengthen our sovereignty and independence" (point 20). 13 These proposals contrast with those of 2017, when Marine Le Pen defended a quasi-exit from the EU and certainly from the Euro – a "Frexit" to respond to the British "Brexit." This radicalism partly cost her victory. The RN candidate was hampered by her former pro-Russian positions. The RN had defended the

10 Complete text at: (www.vie-publique.fr/discours/275608-emmanuel-macron-13072020-politique-de-defense).
idea of a strategic rapprochement with Russia. The war in Ukraine forced her to make a painful revision of her position.\textsuperscript{14}

Jean-Luc Mélenchon (21.95\%): Anti-Capitalism, Anti-Atlanticism and Non-Alignment.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s “presidential” text showed a real interest in global geopolitics. The foreign and defence policies of the France Unbowed (La France Insoumise, LFI) candidate were the opposite of those of Emmanuel Macron. Mélenchon called for a strong independence. He rejected the North Atlantic Alliance and “alignment with the United States” and advocated unilateral departure from NATO. He condemned the idea of a European defence. The war in Ukraine did little to change the former candidate. Though he vilified Vladimir Putin (previously a preferential interlocutor), he rejected NATO with the same vigour: “NATO is a trouble-making machine, an instrument of the declining American empire. But I distinguish this subject from Ukraine, because the responsibility for the war rests on Putin’s shoulders.”\textsuperscript{15} Multilateralism would be the renewed tool of international relations (no intervention without a UN mandate) and cooperation. For the Mediterranean, Mélenchon put forward concrete proposals:

- A common structure for combating pollution and managing the ecosystem of the Mediterranean Sea;
- A Mediterranean television channel;
- A network of Mediterranean universities as well as one of Mediterranean vocational education centres;
- A Mediterranean civil security organization;
- The extension of ecological standards to the Mediterranean.

Éric Zemmour (7.07\%): Obsessed with defending French “civilization” and national independence

Éric Zemmour (Reconquête) stressed foreign policy (points 131 to 181).\textsuperscript{16} There was also the fear of migratory submersion and drowning in a European bureaucratic fishbowl. If Zemmour championed a certain Europe, it was that of a multilateralism of nations. Finally, like De Gaulle in 1965, he proposed exiting NATO’s integrated military command. His detailed proposals on defence are explained by the presence of high-ranking military officials in his circle. His manifesto was oriented towards “reclaiming identity and sovereignty.” Like Mélenchon and Le Pen, dialogue with Russia was a strong point of his foreign policy. Zemmour condemned the invasion of Ukraine but with shared responsibilities: “If Putin is guilty, the West is responsible!”\textsuperscript{17} On the other hand, he stood out for his declared defence of Eastern Christians. He ignored the Mediterranean and his gaze on Africa was coercive: “Refound our relationship with Africa in order to preserve our influence there while putting an end to colonial repentance and supporting States that control migratory flows. Compel countries of origin to take back their nationals” (point 161).

\textsuperscript{14} “I don’t hide the fact that, to a certain extent, I admire Vladimir Putin. (…) We must develop relations with Moscow, we share many common interests, both on a civilizational and strategic level.” (interview in the Russian newspaper Kommersant, 13 October 2011); and “I absolutely do not believe that there was an illegal annexation of Crimea” (interview on BFMTV, 3 January 2017). By Romain Geoffroy and Maxime Vaudano, Le Monde, 20 April 2022, (www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2022/04/20/quels-sont-les-liens-de-marine-le-pen-avec-la-russie-de-vladimir-poutine_6122903_4355770.html).
\textsuperscript{16} See Zemmour’s manifesto at (https://programme.ericzemmour.fr/).
\textsuperscript{17} See article by Marylou Magal, L’Express, 2 March 2022 (www.lexpress.fr/actualite/si-poutine-est-coupable-l-occident-est-responsable-eric-zemmour-face-a-ses-contradictions_2168972.html).
Valérie Pécresse (4.78%): Europe and Control of Immigration

The Republican (LR) candidate made a “bare minimum” effort. Her manifesto was based on a strong Europe of defence but backed by NATO. This policy would have to be accompanied by a renegotiation of the Schengen agreements and the reinforcement of Frontex in the struggle against immigration. Finally, it closed the door to Turkey’s accession to the EU.

Anne Hidalgo (1.74%): Immigration Accepted but Controlled, Calm International Relations

The Socialist Party (PS) candidate wished to “ensure respect for the territorial integrity of Member States in the face of the ‘brutalization’ of international relations – particularly relating to Russia – as well as the rise to power of non-democratic actors.” Immigration was accepted: “I will guarantee a dignified reception in all circumstances for asylum seekers (…). I will fight against the deadly, irregular channels of illegal immigration”(point 68).

Mrs Hidalgo (point 58) proposed addressing “the disorder of the world.” “Europe is now clearly the instrument of our sovereignty. The health crisis has demonstrated this.”

Yannick Jadot (4.63%): Ecological Reorientation but Also Continuity

The candidate of Europe Ecology – The Greens (EELV) was positioned, of course, under the banner of ecological change. International relations, Europe and the link with Africa needed to be revisited by moving away from market or post-colonial logics and creating real partnerships. Dialogue with Russia (“despite its aggressive policy”) and with Turkey (“finding a modus vivendi”), but also with China (“finding a fair balance”) were elements of a policy of appeasement.

Insofar as defence, Jadot did not oppose a rupture but called for an ecological “reorientation.” He did not question the transatlantic link and advocated a strengthening of European defence.19 On 24 February 2022, he condemned the invasion of Ukraine in no uncertain terms.

Jadot also put forth a Mediterranean vision: “We must get out of post-colonial logics by developing respectful and cooperative dialogue (…) in order to promote peace, the reduction of inequalities, the ecological transition and the protection of common goods. For this, we will favour the 5+5 format.”

Fabien Roussel (2.28%): Relaxed Communism but True to the Fundamentals

The candidate of the French Communist Party (PCF) held an appeased and inclusive vision.20 He was attempting to limit the PCF’s slow “descent into hell” since 1981.

Roussel, faithful to the PCF’s anti-European tradition, proposed a “Europe of choice” to advance social or industrial projects (the “Vaccine Airbus,” pt. 161). He called for the withdrawal and eventual dissolution of NATO (pt. 167), replaced by a major European conference including Russia “with a view to signing a treaty of cooperation and collective security.”

Roussel advocated a “total and multilateral denuclearization process” (pt. 166). The UN would be the ideal place to bring to fruition resolutions that have never been implemented (Palestine, Western Sahara, lifting the embargo on Cuba, etc., pt. 172)

In terms of defence, “the armed forces shall disengage from the Sahel.” A “national and popular” defence should accompany a policy “freed from the vestiges of colonialism” (pts. 176-177).

He condemned the invasion of Ukraine – Putin is “a right-wing guy!”,21 but demanded a special status for the Donbass and Crimea and warned not to “wage war on the Russian people.”22
The Trotskyists: Two Versions of Anti-Capitalist Internationalism

France is undoubtedly one of the rare countries that can field two Trotskyist candidates in a presidential election.23 These rival siblings-in-arms put forth two visions that were at once similar and different.

Nathalie Artaud (0.56%), candidate of the Revolutionary Communist League (LCR), considered the main evil to be capitalist society, which hides behind a screen – the State – that allows it to fool the oppressed working class and enrich itself through wars and the exploitation of the poorest. “The world capitalist order still – more than ever – consists of a few large industrial and financial groups (…). To reject barbarism (…) we must fight against the society that engenders it, fight for the overthrow of capitalism (…). Dictatorial regimes (…) have given way to multiple warlords. These militias, Islamist or otherwise, are a direct product of imperialist domination (…). Borders are the bosses’ weapon for dividing the workers.”24

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Philippe Poutou (0.76%), candidate of the New Anti-Capitalist Party (NPA),25 also positioned himself in a “borderless” dimension. He claimed to be resolutely “anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist and internationalist.” The right to migration and asylum was repeated as well as his support for all liberation struggles. Poutou defended the autonomy and/or independence of peoples or ethnic groups, including Catalonia.

Finally, he proposed cancelling the debt of poor countries and ceasing to plunder the wealth of the Third World.26

Nicolas Dupont-Aignan (2.06%): Declared “Gaullism,” Assumed Radicalism

This perennial candidate called himself a “Gaullist.” He rejected European treaties and proposed a new one creating “a community of free nations.” He also advocated leaving NATO’s integrated command. France must be totally independent.

Total war must also be waged against Islamic terrorism and, as with Éric Zemmour, the protection of Eastern Christians must be ensured. Dupont-Aignan also advocated a “strengthened partnership for Africa.” Finally, he defended strengthening anti-migration measures and abolishing jus soli (the “right of the soil”), which automatically confers French nationality to any child born on the territory.

Jean Lassalle (3.13%): The Synthesis of the “Antis”

As a non-conformist, formerly centrist candidate, Lassalle advocated a singular vision of foreign policy and defence. He called for a full exit from NATO, the withdrawal of French armies involved in conflicts and the revision of treaties with former colonies.27 In January 2017, together with others, Jean Lassalle went to meet Bashar el Assad in Damascus.28 The deeper meaning of his thought on international matters remains opaque.
Conclusion: Ruptures or Constants?

What lessons can be drawn from these ephemeral but instructive manifestos? On a purely national level, we have witnessed the disastrous results of the traditional parties (The Republicans and the Socialist Party). The latter, together with the centrists and the ecologists, defended a vision centred on the European Union.

Today, only Emmanuel Macron, who won the election, presents himself as resolutely European. But can we summarize the re-elected President’s thinking on international matters? Europe? Yes. Liberalism? No doubt, but tempered by his dirigiste and exclusive vision of power. Because of the war in Ukraine, NATO, “brain-dead” according to him two years ago, is once again becoming a major vector of European security in his eyes.29 This war will shape French foreign policy for a long time. The French president wants to be the agent of the transformation of Europe. The Mediterranean and the Sahel risk being relegated to the background (even if the confrontation with Moscow also continues in this area).

In contrast to the President, the parties, from the National Rally (RN) to the Trotskyists, not to mention Reconquête and La France Insoumise (France Unbowed, LFI), have a more or less marked anti-European vision. The socialists and ecologists, who joined LFI for the legislative elections under the label New Ecological and Social People’s Union (NUPES), endorsed the radical vision of the Insoumise (revision of European treaties and disobedience à la carte…). These positions are not necessarily original or new.30 The Gaullist model (mistrust of the Americans, partial withdrawal from NATO, Europe under control, strong national independence, dialogue with Moscow) is generally that of many candidates (RN, Reconquête, Dupont-Aignan, Fabien Roussel and even LFI). It is on immigration that the differences are the sharpest and where the left and the right really stand out. The internationalist tradition of the Trotskyist movements also remains present beyond their camp.

Liberalism has never had much appeal in this country.31 “By tradition,” noted Jack Hayward, “the French right is anything but liberal.”32 As for the communists at large, they are still in favour of a command economy. Revolutionary utopia remains alive. The “mobilizing myth of Europe” of which Hayward spoke in the same article no longer works.33 Part of the youth seeks to invent new ones. Mélenchon’s lyricism fascinates sectors of the French population. The leader of LFI takes up the old socialist-communist recipes (price freezes, nationalizations, “bringing the European Union to heel,” non-alignment and cooperation with “sister countries”), but rejuvenates them. In reality, the extreme right and left are united in a radical critique of the centrist Macronian bloc.

Behind the grand phrases of the electoral manifestos, the impoverishment of French foreign thought on international relations is glaringly apparent. Most of the candidates treated the issue as an obligatory but secondary one, without taking into account reality. The obsession with immigration for a good part of them confirms this feeling. It reduces the country to a narrow defence of its own territory, in the face of which the Other/Foreigner is perceived as a threat or, at the very least, a risk. France’s ability to project itself into the world (culturally, diplomatically, and in terms of values), despite the President’s activism, seems very far away…

31 A figure as exceptional as Raymond Aron, for example, despite the power of his writings, was politically marginalised.