



FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY

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Abstract: This article covers the last decade of the 20th century and highlights the foreign policy activities of several French presidents. For example, it examines the foreign policies of François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac, as well as their international engagements. Additionally, it discusses France's role in the political and economic development of the European Union.

Keywords: Francois Mitterrand, Jacques Chirac, European Union, Saint-Malo Declaration, Atlantic Alliance, NATO, Maastricht Treaty, European Security and Defense Policy.

The last decade of the 20th century was a period of profound changes in French foreign policy. The new geopolitical situation that emerged with the end of the Cold War brought a number of strategic challenges for France. In a bipolar world, Paris, which took a "third way" and asserted itself as an independent major power, was now forced to redefine its position in a unipolar system. As is known, France benefited to some extent from the confrontation between the US and the USSR by maintaining a balance between the two poles and conducting an independent foreign policy. In particular, since the era of Charles de Gaulle, Paris pursued military independence, withdrew from NATO's integrated command structure (in 1966), and established an independent defense capability by acquiring nuclear power status. These measures allowed France to partially restore its geopolitical status lost after World War II, as it sought to position itself among the major powers. However, the historical changes of 1989-1991 - from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the dissolution of the USSR - tested the principle of "French exception" (exception française).

During François Mitterrand's presidency (1981–1995), France actively participated in shaping the new European order. Although Paris initially approached the issue of German reunification cautiously, Mitterrand ultimately accepted Germany's peaceful unification. However, he linked German unity directly to the deepening of European integration - meaning that German reunification should take place within the framework of the European Community (later the European Union), and with full adherence to democratic principles and the rules of the Helsinki Final Act. According to Mitterrand, only this way would a re-empowered Germany not pose a threat to stability in Europe. As a result, the Helmut Kohl government guaranteed to alleviate French concerns by committing the unified Germany to remain in NATO and to act within the framework of European cooperation. These events marked a new phase in France's foreign policy regarding Germany and stimulated the strengthening of the Paris–Bonn (later Berlin) axis.[1. P-78.]

Deepening European integration became a priority direction in French foreign policy at the end of the 20th century. With the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992, the European Union was established, and within its framework, the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) was introduced. This initiative was mainly driven by France and Germany's desire to develop

independent diplomatic and defense capabilities in Europe. François Mitterrand and his successor Jacques Chirac (1995–2007) promoted the idea of turning Europe into a “third center of power.” Especially during Chirac’s presidency, Paris began advocating for a multipolar world order — with France trying to transform the European Union into a strong pole as an alternative to U.S. hegemony on the global stage.

The 1998 Saint-Malo Declaration signed between France and the United Kingdom was an important step towards developing European security and defense policy (ESDP), resulting in joint initiatives for the EU’s peacekeeping missions and military forces.

At the same time, while maintaining cooperation with the U.S. within the “Atlantic Alliance,” France sought to reconsider NATO’s new role. Political circles led by Mitterrand believed that with the disappearance of the Soviet threat, NATO should be transformed or even dissolved. Mitterrand himself supported turning NATO into an “expanded Eastern cooperation organization” or reducing the alliance’s significance after the collapse of the USSR. In the 1990s, some members of the French political elite openly proposed the complete dissolution of NATO and the creation of an independent European defense system instead.[2. P-107.]

However, such drastic scenarios did not materialize - on the contrary, NATO demonstrated its relevance in the new conditions during the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, in which France also participated. In 1995, President Chirac reviewed France’s relations with NATO and proposed returning to some of the alliance’s command structures. However, he insisted that French sovereignty and military independence should not be compromised. Due to some disagreements during negotiations with the U.S., full reintegration was not achieved in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Paris actively participated in NATO peacekeeping missions: from 1993 in Bosnia within IFOR/SFOR, and in 1999 in military operations in Kosovo.

These participations, on one hand, demonstrated France’s loyalty to the alliance, and on the other, reflected Paris’s aspiration to form the “European pillar” within NATO in the future. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, French leaders promoted the concept of “European defense,” which was sometimes envisioned as a European pillar within NATO, and sometimes as a completely independent European defense system. It was only by the 21st century that Paris realized the difficulty of fully implementing these plans and began to focus more on balancing responsibilities between NATO and the European Union.

At the end of the 20th century, France’s approach to international conflicts was also noteworthy. During the Gulf War of 1990–1991, France participated in the coalition led by the United States. The Mitterrand government strongly condemned Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait and contributed to the military operation based on UN Security Council resolutions. French armed forces deployed troops to Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Daguet (“Desert Shield”) and took part in the battles to liberate Kuwait. This war also revealed certain shortcomings in France’s defense capabilities: dependency on the U.S. in long-distance troop deployment, intelligence, and communications became apparent. Analysts noted that the outcomes of the Gulf War convinced the French leadership of the need to modernize the army and prepare it for expeditionary (out-of-area) operations. Indeed, after the war, under Defense Minister Pierre Joxe, France began revising its military doctrine. This process was influenced by the general geopolitical crisis following the end of the Cold War and lessons learned specifically from the Gulf War.

After Jacques Chirac became president in 1995, France undertook fundamental changes in its defense and foreign policies. In 1996, he announced the abolition of the general military conscription system in the French army and the transition to a fully professional volunteer force. This decision was crucial for France’s adaptation to new threats and its rapid participation in overseas military operations. Experts assess that during the 1990s, France’s defense doctrine underwent a “revolutionary” transformation - abandoning nuclear deterrence and territorial defense as primary focuses, and instead emphasizing light and mobile forces capable of conducting operations abroad. Researcher Stan Rynning noted that between 1990 and 2000, France underwent a “first-order” strategic shift: moving away from a doctrine of protecting national territory with nuclear means to one focused on “projecting combat forces beyond

national borders.” Naturally, this change was driven by the end of the Cold War and the lessons of the Gulf War mentioned above. President Chirac deeply understood this necessity and implemented the largest military reforms since the De Gaulle era within a short period (1995–1997).[3. P-53.]

In France’s late 20th-century foreign policy, the African region—where many of its former colonies are located—held a special place. During the Cold War, Paris maintained its influence in African countries through a network known as “Françafrique,” protecting its strategic interests via permanent military bases and security agreements. By the 1990s, these relations began to be reconsidered. At the France-Africa summit held in La Baule in June 1990, President Mitterrand officially emphasized the need for democratic reforms in African states for the first time. He linked the transition to democracy to French economic aid, stating that “countries aspiring to freedom will feel France’s cooperation more.” This speech marked a symbolic turning point in Paris’s policy, signifying a shift from unconditional support to conditionality based on democratic principles. However, in practice, this new approach was implemented cautiously. France continued to rely on many authoritarian but loyal African leaders, though it increasingly brought human rights and governance issues onto the agenda.

Throughout the 1990s, France conducted multiple military interventions in various African states, with the Rwandan crisis of 1994 standing out as the most contentious. Prior to and during the 1994 genocide, Paris actively supported the Rwandan government and deployed its forces under the aegis of Operation Turquoise (June–August 1994). Although this operation was officially framed as a humanitarian mission aimed at protecting civilians and establishing safe corridors for refugees, subsequently declassified documents revealed that French military personnel indirectly provided assistance to armed factions implicated in the genocide. This revelation provoked severe international criticism and significantly undermined France’s influence across the African continent. Scholars argue that France’s involvement in the Rwandan tragedy inflicted profound damage on its reputation in Africa. Indeed, following the genocide, the new Rwandan administration severed diplomatic ties with Paris, resulting in France’s diminished role as a trusted mediator within the region. This episode compelled Paris to reassess and recalibrate its African policy.[4. P-94.]

Concurrently, throughout the 1990s, France maintained an active role in other African conflicts. In Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), as instability intensified in the late 1990s, French forces intervened to help contain the civil war. Additionally, France undertook short-term military engagements in support of governments in the Central African Republic and Chad. However, these interventions were not always unilateral; Paris increasingly favored multilateral operations conducted under the auspices of the United Nations or the African Union. For instance, France supported the mediation efforts of ECOWAS and the UN during the 1997 crisis in Congo (Brazzaville) and the 1998 conflict in Guinea-Bissau. This strategic shift was designed to shed France’s erstwhile image as a “lone policeman” and to bolster its role as a peacekeeping actor cooperating within the international community.

By the close of the twentieth century, France’s foreign policy coalesced around several key priorities: (1) advancing European integration and augmenting national power through the European framework; (2) safeguarding national interests within the U.S.-led global order while promoting a multipolar international system; and (3) preserving traditional spheres of influence in former colonies, especially in Africa, while adapting to evolving geopolitical realities. During this period, France actively leveraged its status as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, spearheading initiatives to adopt resolutions on critical issues such as Iraq, the Yugoslav crisis, and African conflicts throughout the 1990s. As a nuclear-armed state, France maintained a prominent voice on the global stage. Notably, following international condemnation of French nuclear tests at the Mururoa Atoll in the Pacific in 1995, President Jacques Chirac halted further testing and acceded to the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty. This decision underscored France’s commitment to international obligations while simultaneously reaffirming its intent to preserve sovereign control over its nuclear policy.

As a result of the factors outlined above, by the end of the twentieth century, French foreign policy had become significantly more flexible and multidimensional. Paris acted simultaneously as the locomotive of European integration and as a staunch defender of its independent national interests. In the late 1990s—particularly during the Kosovo crisis of 1999—France cooperated with the United States, which led military operations within the framework of NATO, while also participating as a key political player in the European Union’s negotiations. This approach reflected a dual-track strategy: on one hand, France remained a loyal member of the Western alliance; on the other, it persistently promoted the idea of “Europe as an independent power.” Although the French leadership at the end of the twentieth century recognized the United States as a global “hyperpower” (Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine coined the term “hyperpuissance” for the U.S. in 1998), it nevertheless continued to strive toward a multipolar world order. President Jacques Chirac’s calls for a “world with multiple centers of power” and his speeches from the United Nations podium in 1996–97 exemplify this vision.[5. P-61.]

In summary, by the close of the twentieth century, French foreign policy had adapted to new global conditions while preserving its historical principles—namely, national sovereignty and the pursuit of “la grandeur” (greatness). With the end of the Cold War, France faced the challenge of safeguarding its national interests within the new U.S.-led international order. To this end, Paris operated on multiple fronts simultaneously: it enhanced its strategic weight through deepening European integration; maintained cooperation within NATO while advancing European defense initiatives; and sought to preserve its traditional influence in Africa and other regions through innovative means. Scholars emphasize that while the core objectives of French foreign policy in the 1990s—protecting national independence and power—remained unchanged, the means to achieve these goals were substantially updated. These included military modernization, the strengthening of multilateral diplomacy, and leveraging international institutions to extend France’s influence. This evolution positioned France to enter the twenty-first century with a renewed strategic foundation.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a new international order at the beginning of this period necessitated a strategic realignment for France. Having successfully maintained a balance and pursued an independent foreign policy by leveraging the bipolar rivalry between the United States and the USSR, France was now compelled to develop alternative strategies to counterbalance U.S. hegemony in a unipolar world. In particular, during the presidencies of François Mitterrand and subsequently Jacques Chirac, France actively engaged in diplomatic efforts aimed at promoting a multipolar world order.

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