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# Blinded by Bias

## Chapter 5 | Diplomacy at All Costs: France

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# Diplomacy at All Costs: France

In the lead-up to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the French government unfailingly sought to solve the crisis through diplomatic channels right up to the very last-minute, stepping up its pressure as Russia increasingly made its expansionist ambitions clear. At the most fundamental level, senior decision-makers and their advisors considered a full-scale invasion to be unlikely. French officials failed to understand Putin's political intent and consequently dismissed the possibility of invasion, believing the return to war in Europe was highly unlikely. As a nuclear power, and with long-standing historical ties to Russia, France's leadership advocated for de-escalation. The overall understanding of the crisis at the decision-making level was guided by factors including commitment to ongoing negotiations in the Normandy Format, the perceived irrationality of large-scale war, and disbelief in Putin's stated interests. France emerges as a Dove state in our analysis because it discounted the possibility of a full-scale invasion, considered Russia to be a non-existential threat to French national security and did not offer any military support to Ukraine prior to the invasion.

## A Long-standing Relationship

Since the end of the Cold War, France and Russia cultivated a close relationship, especially following the 1998 Yekaterinburg Triangle, which also included Germany, and envisioned the stabilisation of 'Grand Europe'.<sup>1</sup> The coalition's goal was to guarantee peace through strengthened economic and political cooperation.<sup>2</sup> The relationship between them continued on friendly terms, with the interests of France and Russia aligning over dissatisfaction with the US' dominance in global politics.<sup>3</sup> Like Russia, France envisioned the existence of a multipolar world. For instance, in 2003, France, Germany, and Russia jointly declared their opposition to the US-UK intervention in Iraq.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, successive French governments had always considered Russia to be a key actor within Europe's larger security architecture, emphasising the need for European states to cooperate with their neighbour. However, fractures in the French-Russian relationship started emerging with the progressively authoritarian turn taken under Putin's leadership. Still, France played a mediating role during the Georgia-Russia war in 2008 given its independent stance towards Russia more generally.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Gomart, 'France's Russia Policy: Balancing Interests and Values', *The Washington Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2007): 147, <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2007.30.2.147>.

<sup>2</sup> 'Conférence de presse conjointe de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, Boris Eltsine, Président de Russie, et Helmut Kohl, Chancelier d'Allemagne, sur les projets de coopération entre la France la Russie et l'Allemagne dans le domaine spatial, des transports et des sciences humaines, sur la sécurité du continent européen et la crise du Kosovo, Moscou le 26 mars 1998', Élysée, 26 March 1998, <https://www.elysee.fr/jacques-chirac/1998/03/26/conference-de-presse-conjointe-de-mm-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-republique-boris-eltsine-president-de-russie-et-helmut-kohl-chancelier-dallemagne-sur-les-projets-de-cooperation-entre-la-france-la-russie-et-lallemagne-dans-le-domaine-spatial>; Gomart, 'France's Russia Policy', 147.

<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales* XVI (July 2015): 118.

<sup>4</sup> Gomart, 'France's Russia Policy', 150-151.

<sup>5</sup> Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', 119-20.

Since the seizure of Crimea Russia was seen to be a threat but one that could be solved within diplomatic frameworks.

It exemplified France's preference to keep Russia close and to avoid isolating it.<sup>6</sup> The 2014 invasion of Ukraine marked a caesura for French-Russian relations. France cancelled its agreement to deliver two *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships to Russia and terminated high-level discussions.<sup>7</sup> France also pushed for sanctions at the EU level and became involved in the negotiations of the Minsk Agreements led by Germany. French mediating efforts were pursued through the 'Normandy' format, facilitating dialogue on critical aspects of the Agreements.<sup>8</sup> In 2018, the French Senate and the Russian Federation Council issued a joint report on parliamentary dialogue and the importance of reestablishing trust. At the same time, the French Senate highlighted the overall degradation of Europe's security environment since the 2014 Crimea Crisis, which was "extremely worrying."<sup>9</sup> There was a clear perception among senior French government officials that Putin wanted to restore Russia's role as a great power. Still, it was generally considered that he would try and do so by remaining under the threshold of large-scale violence. As one senior French Ministry of Defence official recalls, the French system was "*reluctant to see that Russia would be ready to wage a large-scale war to achieve its goals because it could already secure a lot of ambition using hybrid warfare.*"<sup>10</sup> The French government's outlook on Russia was thus shaped by France's consideration of its own nuclear power status dealing with another nuclear power. Economic interests also played a role albeit comparatively much less so. Overall trade volume with Russia remained lower than other EU countries such as Germany and the Netherlands, even if prior to the annexation of Crimea France was Russia's third European supplier and France's third market outside the EU, excluding Switzerland.<sup>11</sup> This increase in economic dependence was explained by the need to match the diplomatic friendship repeatedly signalled by the two countries.<sup>12</sup> One high-ranking French military official observed how these economies ties influenced threat perception: "*There were so many economic links with Russia that it was totally insane to think about a war against Russia.*"<sup>13</sup>

## Russia as a Localised Threat

Among French governmental officials, Russia was perceived as a regional threat that could be contained, up until the fall of 2021. Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, since the seizure of Crimea Russia was seen to be a threat but one that could be solved within diplomatic frameworks.<sup>14</sup> Although Russia's massive deployment of military forces in April 2021 near the Ukrainian border certainly alerted parts of the French government, it was widely assumed that Russia was still acting in the context of the Minsk Agreements. According to one senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Russia was trying to coerce Ukraine to implement its parts of the negotiations.<sup>15</sup> Several aspects of the Minsk Agreements were heavily contested including the requirement for Russia to recognise the regions under

<sup>6</sup> David Cadier, 'Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia: A Milieu Goals Explanation', *International Affairs* 94, no. 6 (2018): 1356.

<sup>7</sup> Cadier, 1360.

<sup>8</sup> David Carment and Dani Belo, *The Normandy Negotiations Renewed: Divisions at Home and Opportunity Abroad* (Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2020), 1.

<sup>9</sup> *France-Russie : dialogue parlementaire pour rétablir la confiance (version française)* (Sénat Français et Conseil de la Fédération de Russie, 2018), 17, 18, <https://www.senat.fr/rap/r17-387-1/r17-387-1.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Interview 32

<sup>11</sup> Cadier, 'Continuity and Change in France's Policies towards Russia', 1351.

<sup>12</sup> Facon, 'La relation France-Russie à l'épreuve', 122.

<sup>13</sup> Interview 27

<sup>14</sup> Interview 30

<sup>15</sup> Interview 29

its control as Ukrainian territories.<sup>16</sup> Russia's use of coercive diplomacy was therefore seen as a way to pressure Ukraine into making more concessions on this front rather than preparing for an actual invasion. As one senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official recalled:

*"If the goal was to regain control of Ukraine in the way he [Putin] wanted it, then we were far more concerned about destabilisation, about economic coercion, about infiltration, about overthrowing the government from the inside, about weakening Zelensky through oligarchs than an all-out invasion. [...] We thought that this was the worst way to go for him."*<sup>17</sup>

Overall, French officials found it hard to imagine a conflict scenario in which Russia would consider going to war and thought that Putin would reason the same way as they did.

The publication of Putin's summer essay did spark debate across the French government. As related by the same French official previously quoted, some argued that the essay was about embellishing Russia's claims on Crimea, whereas others became more suspicious of Putin's intents.<sup>18</sup> In bilateral talks, US officials did not share particular concerns over the importance of the essay, which reassured some French officials. As related by the French official: *"The Americans weren't overly concerned, which, you know, I thought mistakenly so, it [the threat] was probably not so serious. So this is late August, early September."*<sup>19</sup>

The subsequent September troop buildup triggered more alarm bells in Paris. After meeting Russian Defence Minister Shoigu and Foreign Minister Lavrov in Paris in November 2021, French Foreign Minister Le Drian gave a speech in front of the French National Assembly announcing "massive strategic consequences" if Russia were to infringe Ukraine's territorial integrity.<sup>20</sup> As shared by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, this meant that economic and diplomatic consequences "would be so massive that they would have a strategic implication for Russia in terms of isolation and even in terms of weakening [...] the regime's hold on power."<sup>21</sup> The two countries' ministers met at the occasion of the 2021 Paris International Conference for Libya and also discussed the growing presence of the Wagner paramilitary group on African fronts, trying to destabilise French deployments.<sup>22</sup> With concerns over a Russian invasion, if only partial, France became involved in the drafting of EU, NATO and G7 sanction packages, as part of a collective deterrence effort.

On 15 December 2021, Putin submitted his list of demands to the US and NATO, which included NATO's return to its 1997 borders, the diminution of the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe, and more generally respect for Russia's sphere of

<sup>16</sup> Marie Dumoulin, 'Ukraine, Russia, and the Minsk Agreements: A Post-Mortem', European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 February 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/ukraine-russia-and-the-minsk-agreements-a-post-mortem/>.

<sup>17</sup> Interview 31

<sup>18</sup> Interview 31

<sup>19</sup> Interview 31

<sup>20</sup> 'Ukraine : la Russie subira des «conséquences stratégiques massives» en cas d'attaque, avertit Paris', Le Figaro, 15 December 2021, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/flash-actu/ukraine-la-russie-subira-des-consequences-strategiques-massives-en-cas-d-attaque-avertit-paris-20211215>.

<sup>21</sup> Interview 31

<sup>22</sup> 'French and Russian Ministers Hold Talks on Security Issues', Ambassade de France Au Royaume-Uni, 12 November 2021, <https://uk.ambafrance.org/French-and-Russian-ministers-hold-talks-on-security-issues>; Élie Tenenbaum and Amélie Zima, *Return to the East: The Russian Threat and the French Pivot to Europe's Eastern Flank*, no. 119, Focus Stratégique (Institut Français des Relations Internationales, 2024), 25, <https://www.ifri.org/en/studies/return-east-russian-threat-and-french-pivot-europes-eastern-flank>.



influence in these regions.<sup>23</sup> As interpreted by a senior French Ministry of Defence official, the demands were seen as the “bureaucratic translation of the ambition laid out by Putin in his article in July.”<sup>24</sup> Another high-ranking French military official explained:

*“I don’t think we asked ourselves precisely why Russia had such unrealistic and fanciful demands, other than the fact that it was kind of a list of requirements intended for starting a negotiation, [...] and the final scope was to avoid any Ukrainian adhesion to NATO and to the European Union.”<sup>25</sup>*

The demands were seen to be one-sided and preposterous. A senior French Ministry of Defence official added:

*“The way they were framed would essentially force NATO to unilaterally accept concessions when it comes to exercises, deployments, deployments of specific weapons, including theatre range, deep precision strike capabilities [...] which would be [...] literally unacceptable for NATO.”<sup>26</sup>*

Russian demands were consequently rejected at the end of January, while inviting Russia to continue the conversation.

As tensions exacerbated, French Defence officials organised multiple wargames on the possibility of a Russian attack on Ukraine. The wargames gathered civilian experts on Russia and Ukraine and focused on developing different possible scenarios. As related by a high-ranking French military official:

*“They [all experts] thought that it would be very unlikely that there would be a large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the kind of invasion we ended up with. [...] According to them, Russia would not be able to install in Kyiv a kind of a puppet government, placed under the orders of Moscow.”<sup>27</sup>*

Despite efforts to understand Putin’s interests, French officials still downplayed the signs of a full-scale invasion.

## Give Diplomacy a Chance

As related, in the 2010s France had attempted to maintain dialogue and anchor Russia to Europe. President Macron pursued this policy during all his successive presidential terms, reflecting a long-held tradition in French foreign and security policies.<sup>28</sup> On 27 August 2019, he addressed this policy in a speech at the Ambassadors’ Conference, where he declared:

*“We are part of Europe; so is Russia. And if we are unable to accomplish anything useful with Russia at any given time, we will remain in a state of deeply unproductive tension. [...] Pushing Russia away from Europe is a major strategic error, because we are pushing*

<sup>23</sup> ‘Vladimir Putin Calls for Security Guarantee from West about NATO’s Expansion’, ABC News, 23 December 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Interview 32

<sup>25</sup> Interview 23

<sup>26</sup> Interview 32

<sup>27</sup> Interview 23

<sup>28</sup> Facon, ‘La relation France-Russie à l’épreuve’, 119.

The demands were seen as “the bureaucratic translation of the ambition laid out by Putin in his article in July”.

*it either toward isolation, which heightens tensions, or toward alliances with other great powers such as China, which would not at all be in our interest.”<sup>29</sup>*

In combination with this policy tradition, the French government considers itself an unaligned country and its sovereignty and independence as key priorities. As related by a high-ranking French military official:

*“[Since] de Gaulle, we like to be independent in the way we assess [...] the instability in the world. [...] Even if we are in NATO, we don’t want to be dependent on the US or even other countries. We try to maintain a degree of independence. This degree of independence is ensured by [independence] in energy for example. [...] So, we don’t want to be dependent on resources from Russia.”<sup>30</sup>*

Because of its nuclear power status, the French government never perceived Russia as an existential threat. As argued by a high-ranking French military official, nuclear deterrence has an impact on the relationship between the two countries, which contributed to France’s lack of fear regarding Russian nuclear warheads before the invasion.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, France’s status as a nuclear-armed state incentivised Macron to maintain dialogue with Russia to prevent any possible escalation. However, the official also added: *“The political attempt to discuss [...] till the last moment [...] was something that was not understood by many countries in Europe.”<sup>32</sup>* According to him, France, as a nuclear power, had a different conception and understanding of the Russian threat and promoted a more balanced approach upholding de-escalation.<sup>33</sup> He also specified: *“There was no willingness to give Russia the impression that we were going to go to war against them or to take part in the conflict.”<sup>34</sup>*

While the French government focused on the diplomatic approach, other states committed to military support for Ukraine. As explained by a senior French Ministry of Defence official:

*“If you’re convinced that what [the Russians are] going to be attempting is a large-scale attrition war against Ukraine, certainly providing military aid to Ukraine becomes probably central to your effort.”<sup>35</sup>*

The official added that this was not France’s logic because the French government was convinced Putin would not attempt such a military operation: *“There was no commonly shared view regarding the fact that a large-scale war was the most plausible outcome of that.”<sup>36</sup>*

There were also other reasons that explain France’s preference for economic sanctions. Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, France did not send military support to the Ukrainians in the lead-up to the invasion because Ukrainians were not expected to be able to resist a Russian invasion. Even in the case of Ukrainian resistance, arming Ukraine before the invasion could have led to further escalation. This would have

<sup>29</sup> ‘Discours du Président de la République à la conférence des ambassadeurs et des ambassadrices de 2019’, Élysée, 27 August 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1>.

<sup>30</sup> Interview 33

<sup>31</sup> Interview 27

<sup>32</sup> Interview 27

<sup>33</sup> Interview 27

<sup>34</sup> Interview 27

<sup>35</sup> Interview 32

<sup>36</sup> Interview 32

“There was no willingness to give Russia the impression that we were going to go to war against them or to take part in the conflict.”

allowed Russia to believe France accepted conflict and it could have incentivised Russia to invade.<sup>37</sup> As related by another senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official: *“The little we could do to bolster Ukraine’s defence would have a net negative effect by giving Putin the reasons or the rationale to more easily invade.”*<sup>38</sup>

France’s inclination not to antagonise Russia consequently oriented French responses towards de-escalation through economic sanctions and political dialogue, up to the final moments before the invasion. Because French officials did not expect a full-scale invasion, economic sanctions were seen as the instrument of choice to deter Putin. As stated by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official: *“We saw a lot of talk about economic damage and significant consequences and economic consequences but that military option was very much taken off the table.”*<sup>39</sup>

After a series of phone calls, Macron and Putin finally met in Moscow on 7 February 2022. The press conference resulting from the meeting presented positive improvements towards a diplomatic resolution, even though no solution to the crisis was formally mentioned. On 20 February, Macron announced that he convinced Putin and Biden to meet to discuss viable security guarantees while respecting international law and precluding force.<sup>40</sup> Paraphrasing a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, France’s attempt to exhaust all diplomatic tools demonstrated its resolve to change the course of events. This endeavour, the senior official asserted, was not necessarily the result of incredulity about the possibility of war, but rather of the willingness to find a way out.<sup>41</sup>

## Rationality through the French-looking Glass

Intelligence assessments during the lead-up to the crisis played an important role in France’s overall threat assessment. When the US and the UK first shared their assessments with allies, French officials remained sceptical. The fallout from the US’ intelligence failure, if not fabrication then manipulation of evidence of Iraq’s alleged weapons of mass destruction programme in 2003, continued to haunt its credibility in the eyes of European officials.<sup>42</sup> A high-ranking French military official elaborated on this mistrust which created doubts among French officials about US motives, believing *“that the US were trying to push us to something very aggressive”*.<sup>43</sup> More specifically, the official explained that officials believed the US was *“telling us lies about the more precise intel that they had, that we were just blind about what the intent was”*.<sup>44</sup> The US also stressed the imminency of the attack but could not share how the assessment was made. At the same time, according to a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, what US intelligence reported about troop deployments on the ground, was also recorded by

<sup>37</sup> Interview 30

<sup>38</sup> Interview 31

<sup>39</sup> Interview 29

<sup>40</sup> Staunton, ‘A Useful Failure’, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Interview 30

<sup>42</sup> Mark Phythian and David Strachan-Morris, ‘Intelligence & the Russo-Ukrainian War: Introduction to the Special Issue’, *Intelligence and National Security* 39, no. 3 (2024): 377–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2024.2330132>.

<sup>43</sup> Interview 27

<sup>44</sup> Interview 27



“There was probably a certain naivety on our part, [...] but I also think that some Russian diplomats genuinely believed that their country would not invade Ukraine, and at least on a large scale.”

French military intelligence assessments: *“We have seen exactly the same thing including intelligence elements which were part of the analysis in Washington that it was serious.”*<sup>45</sup> However, the French could not independently ascertain Russia’s intent. This was related repeatedly over the course of our interviews. As shared by a high-ranking French military official: *“The assessment was a good one even if we didn’t perceive the intent to invade.”*<sup>46</sup>

Alongside the disconcerting message delivered in US intelligence diplomacy, the Biden administration signalled that the US would not send American troops to Ukraine. In an interview with reporters, US President Biden mentioned that he would not send US combat troops to Ukraine but that: *“If in fact he [Putin] invades Ukraine, there will be severe consequences [...], economic consequences like ones he’s never seen.”*<sup>47</sup> As related by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the US policy was twofold, signalling: *“We know that [the Russians are] gonna invade Ukraine, but we won’t do anything militarily.”* According to the official, the US strategy was an *“inappropriate mix of options”*.<sup>48</sup> This may have contributed to French officials downplaying the severity of the threat.

Furthermore, as added by multiple French officials, the growing Western interest in Asia and the Pacific had completely downplayed the Russia as a long-term threat to Europe.<sup>49</sup> Especially the US was preoccupied with Asia and more specifically, as stated by a high-ranking French military official: *“The US was more focused on what’s going on in China.”*<sup>50</sup> Another high-ranking French military official argued that Russia also witnessed this shift, arguing that: *“In the Russian mind, the United States was losing interest in Europe and was pivoting towards Asia and the Pacific. So, the US would therefore easily accept the Russian ‘fait accompli.’”*<sup>51</sup> While the US and the UK tried to raise awareness among their European continental allies about the threat posed by Russia, French authorities focused on other factors which affected their assessment including the aforementioned historical ties between Russia and France and the diplomatic trust this fostered. As mentioned by the same official:

*“We trusted also what the Russian authorities were telling us through diplomatic channels. There was probably a certain naivety on our part, [...] but I also think that some Russian diplomats genuinely believed that their country would not invade Ukraine, and at least on a large scale.”*<sup>52</sup>

There was an ongoing dialogue between the two countries in the context of the Minsk process which further shaped French thinking about the possibility of a large-scale war. As argued by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official:

*“We were part of the very dire, tense, complicated discussion with the Ukrainians and Russians and we were probably much more focused on that track and trying to understand what Russia could do with a view to that process.”*<sup>53</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Interview 29

<sup>46</sup> Interview 33

<sup>47</sup> John Wagner and Ashley Parker, ‘Biden Says U.S. Ground Troops “Not on the Table” for Ukraine’, *The Washington Post*, 8 December 2021, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-says-ground-troops-not-on-the-table-but-putin-would-face-severe-economic-sanctions-for-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/08/3b975d46-5843-11ec-9a18-a506cf3aa31d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-says-ground-troops-not-on-the-table-but-putin-would-face-severe-economic-sanctions-for-ukraine-invasion/2021/12/08/3b975d46-5843-11ec-9a18-a506cf3aa31d_story.html).

<sup>48</sup> Interview 29

<sup>49</sup> Interviews 4, 23, 27

<sup>50</sup> Interview 27

<sup>51</sup> Interview 23

<sup>52</sup> Interview 23

<sup>53</sup> Interview 29

The French military official previously quoted added: *“Ukrainian authorities themselves also said that they didn’t believe in such a war, in such a large-scale invasion.”*<sup>54</sup> Another factor that played a role was the notion for some officials that the size Russian forces was substantial but insufficient to invade, let alone occupy a country the size of Ukraine. A senior French Ministry of Defence official stated that they were not perceived as *“capable of taking Ukraine in a blitzkrieg of some sort. [...] So certainly they may have more limited territorial objectives.”*<sup>55</sup> French intelligence had prioritised counterterrorism in Africa for a long time to the detriment of its ability to gain a good understanding of Russia. Consequently, when Russia deployed troops at the border with Ukraine, French services were not prepared to gather and analyse this type of intelligence, according to a high-ranking French military official.<sup>56</sup>

With regard to intelligence interpretation, French analyses thus diverged from the US and the UK assessments. While the US was explicit about the conflict’s imminency, French intelligence assessed that troops were not ready for high-intensity conflict scenarios, as a high-ranking French military official related.<sup>57</sup> Another high-ranking French military official explained:

*“It was difficult to assess if these troops would maintain their exercise all along the year or [...] if they would stop it after a few weeks. The French perception which was written in the intel reports, was that the options to invade would be very costly so we did not assess that these troops would be useful to invade the huge country of Ukraine. It would be really costly and very risky.”*<sup>58</sup>

The French understanding was partly based on the assessment that the 2014 crisis proved to Russia that using large conventional forces was not the best option to achieve its objectives. Meanwhile, as shared by a senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, Russia probably drew the opposite conclusion, that invading further would not necessarily trigger any concrete reaction from the West.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, since 2014, NATO’s eastern flank had been reinforced through increased troop presence and rotation. While these strategies signalled to Russia that NATO was ready to defend itself if it were to consider territories beyond Ukraine, they also indicated to Russia that NATO’s posture would be strictly defensive. Here again, Russia’s perspective was ignored.

New intelligence assessments from the US and the UK in January 2022 revealed critical capabilities required for credible military deployments and large-scale offensive operations. While intelligence assessments converged between allies, French authorities still did not fully grasp Putin’s political intent. These new assessments fostered another understanding of the Russian force. As argued by a high-ranking French military official:

*“If Russia decides to invade Ukraine, it would only take a few days to control the entire country. Because we thought that the military would use Western doctrines with huge strikes all over Ukraine and take control of Kyiv.”*<sup>60</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Interview 23

<sup>55</sup> Interview 32

<sup>56</sup> Interview 27

<sup>57</sup> Interview 23

<sup>58</sup> Interview 33

<sup>59</sup> Interview 29

<sup>60</sup> Interview 33

This assessment contradicted previous ones which concluded that Russian forces were not ready for war. However, even if the Russian troops now seemed superior to Ukrainian troops, the assessment remained that war would be extremely costly for the Russians. The same official recalled: *“When we talk about February 2022, we still have the same perception that the war is costly for Putin [...] in terms of human resources and economy.”*<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile, like other governments, the French assessment also did not take into account Ukraine's determination and ability to sustain a defence. As paraphrased by senior French Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, the general assessment was that Ukraine would not be able to resist a large-scale war.<sup>62</sup> As a result of these intelligence failures, military support to Ukraine in addition to economic sanctions was off the table. As a high-ranking French military official stated:

*“We couldn't [...] anticipate the Ukrainian mindset and we couldn't understand how they would be so strong and resilient to resist. As we thought Russians would not have difficulties to control Ukraine, we didn't think about helping them by providing [...] weapons.”*<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite clear signs of an impending invasion, French policymakers were hesitant to recognise the scale of the threat and held varying assessments of its severity. On the one hand, the possibility of a Russian full-scale invasion was seen to be unfeasible because Russia was not seen as having the capabilities to conduct and/or sustain a full-scale invasion. On the other hand, after receiving more intelligence from their US and UK allies, a full-scale invasion seemed more plausible but was still deemed too costly for Russia. Even if Russian forces were perceived to be superior to the Ukrainians, French officials still did not perceive a large-scale and conventional war a viable option for Putin, because of the economic costs Russia would incur, and therefore concluded that a full-scale invasion was not likely. As a result, officials understood Russia's effort as limited to hybrid conflict or to a small territorial incursion. This overall impression led them to view Russia's deployment as part of signalling strategy.

In terms of response options, sending indirect and direct military aid to Ukraine was discussed but excluded from support options, as this was seen to potentially antagonise Russia while at the same time incentivising and legitimising a Russian invasion. This logic channelled French responses to diplomatic dialogue between the two presidents and the preparation of economic sanction packages. It also reflects a wider phenomenon in which European governments, whether unconsciously or not, dismissed the possibility of large-scale war scenarios until very late because of their undesirability. Instead, the focus remained on the costs that made the invasion deemed unlikely, leading officials to believe Putin would resort to grey-zone strategies. Overall, France's goal was to prevent any confrontation with Russia from happening to avoid and mitigate potential political and economic costs for all parties involved. As a result, the French reasoning was driven by the belief that diplomatic and economic means could resolve the crisis, impeding a fast military response and anticipation.

<sup>61</sup> Interview 33

<sup>62</sup> Interview 30

<sup>63</sup> Interview 33

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