

Forecast Scenarios for the Development of the French Republic as a Regional Leader: Risks and Threats to Ukraine

Прогнозні сценарії розвитку французької республіки як регіонального лідера: ризики та загрози для України

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Дипломатична академія України імені Геннадія Удовенка, Київ, Україна

Received: March 16, 2026 | Revised: April 15, 2026 | Accepted: April 30, 2026

UDC 327:355.01(44+477)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33445/sds.2026.16.2.5>

Purpose. The purpose of the study is to analyze the development scenarios of the French Republic as a regional leader and to identify the associated risks and threats to Ukraine, as well as to formulate strategic guidelines for Ukrainian foreign policy.

Method: The study is based on a qualitative approach using scenario analysis, comparative analysis, and systematization of scholarly sources. Elements of political and economic analysis are applied to assess internal and external factors influencing France's policy.

Findings. Three core development scenarios for France are identified: optimistic ("European Shield"), realistic ("Strategic Exhaustion"), and pessimistic ("Internal Fragmentation"). It is demonstrated that France's strengthening may both enhance support for Ukraine and generate risks of political dependency and strategic compromise.

Theoretical implications. The study advances theoretical approaches to analyzing the role of regional leaders in security systems by integrating scenario modeling with the concept of EU strategic autonomy.

Practical implications. The findings can be used by Ukrainian public authorities to shape foreign policy strategy, manage cooperation risks with France, and develop defense-industrial cooperation.

Paper type. Analytical.

Мета дослідження. аналіз сценаріїв розвитку Французької Республіки як регіонального лідера та визначення пов'язаних із цим ризиків і загроз для України, а також формування стратегічних орієнтирів для української зовнішньої політики.

Метод дослідження. Дослідження базується на якісному підході з використанням методів сценарного аналізу, порівняльного аналізу та систематизації наукових джерел. Застосовано елементи політико-економічного аналізу для оцінювання внутрішніх і зовнішніх факторів впливу на політику Франції.

Результати дослідження. Встановлено три базові сценарії розвитку Франції: оптимістичний ("Європейський щит"), реалістичний ("Стратегічне виснаження") та песимістичний ("Внутрішня фрагментація"). Доведено, що посилення Франції може як зміцнити підтримку України, так і створити ризики політичної залежності та стратегічних компромісів.

Теоретична цінність дослідження. Розширено наукові підходи до аналізу ролі держав-лідерів у регіональних безпекових системах через інтеграцію сценарного моделювання та концепції стратегічної автономії ЄС.

Практична цінність дослідження. Результати можуть бути використані органами державної влади України для формування зовнішньополітичної стратегії, управління ризиками співпраці з Францією та розвитку оборонно-промислової взаємодії.

Тип статті. Аналітична.

Key words: French Republic, European Union, Ukraine, Forecast Scenarios, National Security, Foreign Policy, Regional Leadership, European Integration, Advantages, Risks, Threats.

Ключові слова: Французька Республіка, Європейський Союз, Україна, прогнозні сценарії, національна безпека, зовнішня політика, регіональне лідерство, євроінтеграція, переваги, ризики, загрози.

Introduction

France's development as a regional leader in 2025–2026 plays a crucial role in shaping European policy, particularly concerning Ukraine. Its potential strengthening as a regional hegemon may have both positive and negative implications for Kyiv.

In recent years, France has faced a series of challenges in the economic and domestic political spheres, a decline in influence on the African continent, and an imbalance in the Paris-Berlin axis. Furthermore, there is a palpable lack of trust from the Baltic states and Poland, who are unsettled by Paris's historical inclination toward a "dialogue with the Kremlin" Consequently,

Ukraine must remain prepared for various scenarios regarding France's evolution and actively work toward strengthening its own international standing.

The development of the French Republic as a regional leader hinges on its strategic initiatives in defense, economic policy, and technological innovation. France's ambitions to bolster its influence in Europe are evident through its advocacy for a stronger European defense industrial base and its proactive role in shaping EU policy. This multifaceted approach positions France as a pivotal actor in regional leadership.

In advancing strategic defense initiatives, France has prioritized the creation of "Defense Europe", promoting frameworks such as the European Intervention Initiative (EII) to foster military cooperation among EU member states. As Tomasz Młynarski noted in his research (Młynarski, T., 2024), France's efforts to strengthen European strategic autonomy and defense capabilities are aimed at enhancing its global significance and power. This positions France as a formidable player in international relations, equipped with reliable military forces and mechanisms for independent policymaking. This shift toward European strategic autonomy not only augments French military capabilities but also reinforces its leadership in European security matters.

The joint leadership of France and Germany within the Eurozone has been instrumental in addressing economic challenges, demonstrating their collective influence on EU fiscal and competition policies. As Hanno Degner (Degner, H., & Leuffen, D., 2021) points out, the governments of these two nations have successfully utilized both institutional and ideational leadership at domestic and international levels. The ability to align national priorities with EU objectives has allowed France to effectively assert its economic leadership.

Furthermore, France's commitment to maintaining its position in global technological advancements, particularly in Artificial Intelligence (AI), is vital to its geopolitical relevance. According to Eric Perrin (Perrin, E., 2023), the race for technological supremacy is a defining factor of the new geopolitical reality, and France must compete vigorously to preserve its leading position in innovation and national security. This race is reshaping global power dynamics, and France's historical role in innovation positions it favorably in this context.

Conversely, some analysts argue that despite these efforts, French influence may wane due to domestic challenges and external competition, necessitating renewed strategies to maintain its leadership status in an evolving geopolitical landscape. Salih I. Bora (Bora, S. I., & Schramm, L., 2023) suggests that France's renewed influence stems from an interplay of factors across different governance levels: a centralized political system and meticulous domestic policy preparation, alongside more balanced bilateral relations with Germany and responses to external shocks that have impacted the EU.

However, existing research has not sufficiently explored the potential development scenarios for the French Republic as a regional leader that must be considered when formulating Ukraine's foreign policy.

Literature review

Contemporary research on the role of the French Republic in the European and global security architecture is situated at the intersection of international relations theory, EU strategic autonomy, and neorealism. A significant body of scholarship focuses on the concept of "European strategic autonomy", actively promoted by France as a tool to strengthen its leadership within the European Union. Studies by Tomasz Młynarski emphasize that enhancing EU defense capabilities is a key driver of France's geopolitical influence.

At the same time, the work of Hanno Degner highlights the role of the Franco-German tandem in shaping EU economic policy, pointing to structural constraints within this partnership. Research by Eric Perrin considers technological factors, particularly artificial intelligence, as decisive in contemporary geopolitical competition.

However, there is an ongoing academic debate regarding the potential decline of French influence due to domestic political and economic challenges. Salih I. Bora stresses the multi-level nature of French leadership, which depends on the interaction between internal and external factors. Despite the extensive literature, insufficient attention has been paid to scenario-based analysis of France's development in relation to its impact on the security of Ukraine, which underscores the relevance of this study.

Materials and Methods

The methodological framework of the study is based on a combination of qualitative approaches, with scenario analysis serving as the primary forecasting tool. The empirical base includes scholarly publications in international relations, official documents of the French Republic, analytical reports of international organizations, and open-source data on the policies of the European Union and European security processes.

Scenario modeling was applied to construct alternative trajectories of state development under conditions of uncertainty. Key variables were identified, including economic stability, political cohesion, defense capacity, and foreign policy priorities. Comparative analysis was used to assess France's interaction with other actors, particularly Germany and United States.

In addition, elements of systems analysis were employed to identify causal relationships between domestic processes in France and their impact on the security of Ukraine. The limitations of the study include reliance on open sources and the high level of uncertainty in the international environment, which may affect the accuracy of forecasts.

Results

Domestic Barriers to Leadership

The development of France as a regional leader in 2025–2026 is hindered by a series of chronic issues that Emmanuel Macron and his government struggle to resolve, often merely “freezing” them. These barriers not only constrain Paris's regional ambitions but also cast doubt on the **viability of the “Europe that protects”** (*l'Europe qui protège*) concept.

The Economic Dimension: Fiscal Vulnerability

Leadership within Europe requires a stable “fiscal backbone”, yet the French economy remains in a precarious state. Projections indicate that with a budget deficit of 4.7 % of GDP, the public debt-to-GDP ratio will continue to escalate relative to annual national wealth, rising from 115.9 % in 2025 to 117.9 % in 2026, and potentially reaching 118.7 % by 2027 (French Republic, 2025).

As of January 2026, the target deficit has been revised to 5 % of GDP (compared to 5.4% in 2025) (OFCE, 2026; Al Jazeera News, 2026, February 2). This target is less ambitious than the initial 4.7 % proposed in the draft budget, reflecting significant political concessions (OFCE, 2026). Such fiscal pressure compels the government to adopt austerity measures, which in turn limit the ability to fund ambitious defense initiatives and aid allies without triggering domestic social upheaval. Furthermore, due to political instability, international credit rating agencies maintain “negative outlooks” on France, thereby increasing the cost of sovereign borrowing.

“Internal Paralysis” and Political Fragmentation

France is currently grappling with “internal paralysis” stemming from a deeply fractured Parliament, which frequently forces the government to bypass the legislative process.

- **Constitutional Article 49.3:** The recurrent use of this provision to pass the 2026 budget without a parliamentary vote has sparked waves of no-confidence motions and widespread street protests.
- **Political Polarization:** The intensifying confrontation between Macron's "Centrist" bloc and radical factions (led by Le Pen and Mélenchon) renders foreign policy a hostage to domestic

political bargaining. This creates a tangible risk of a radical strategic shift following the 2027 presidential elections.

Geopolitical Decline and the Erosion of the “Franco-German Engine”

France is currently navigating its most significant loss of influence on the African continent in over 60 years. The total withdrawal of troops from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger has created a security vacuum that is being rapidly filled by Russia (specifically the “Africa Corps”). Paris has struggled to establish a new discourse with the younger generation of Africans, for whom France remains a symbol of “neocolonialism”. Despite a new “partnership” strategy, French influence in the region is becoming increasingly marginalized. Consequently, France must defend its political and economic positions by seeking new cooperation formats that resonate with African stakeholders (Zueva, K. P., & Timofeev, P. P., 2023).

The Crisis of the Paris-Berlin Tandem

The Paris-Berlin axis, which has traditionally steered the European Union, is currently in a state of deep imbalance:

- **Industrial Rivalry:** Flagship joint projects, such as the Main Ground Combat System (MGCS) and the Future Combat Air System (FCAS/SCAF), are repeatedly stalled due to industrial competition and divergent strategic visions.
- **Energy Divergence:** France remains committed to nuclear energy as a cornerstone of its sovereignty, while Germany continues to block nuclear energy from receiving European subsidies, prioritizing renewable energy sources instead.

Trust Deficit in Eastern Europe

Despite active assistance to Ukraine, France continues to face skepticism from the Baltic states and Poland. These nations remain wary of Paris’s perceived inclination toward “dialogue with the Kremlin” (however hypothetical) and its concept of “strategic autonomy”. In the eastern reaches of the EU, this concept is often interpreted as an attempt to distance Europe from the United States and NATO.

Research (Zueva, K. P., & Timofeev, P. P., 2023) indicates that the ambitious project of EU strategic autonomy—and the vision of a “Power Europe” involving Russia—has been suspended. While France’s stance on the Ukrainian crisis has hardened, leading to a deterioration in Franco-Russian relations, it is likely that Paris will only be able to return to its broader geopolitical ambitions after the conflict concludes.

Conclusion of the Current State

While France remains an intellectual and military leader in Europe (Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, 2025), this leadership is currently undermined by domestic polarization and financial exhaustion. Without budgetary stabilization and a “reset” of relations with Germany, French leadership risks becoming confined to the rhetoric of Emmanuel Macron. Given France's historical role, its trajectory directly impacts the security of Ukraine.

Scenario 1. Optimistic: “The European Shield”

In this scenario, France successfully asserts itself as the vanguard of European defence, either superseding or substantially augmenting the security role of the United States. Paris establishes a robust EU “strategic autonomy” framework. In conjunction with the United Kingdom, France leads a multinational stabilisation force in Ukraine (comprising up to 15,000 personnel), serving as a definitive security guarantee pending Ukraine’s accession to NATO. Consequently, Ukraine emerges as a pivotal component of this architecture, acting as the “Eastern Outpost”.

As a catalyst for European integration, France effectively leads a “coalition of the willing”.

Strategic Actions by France:

- **Consolidation of Status:** Solidifying its position as Europe’s primary military and logistics hub.

- **Industrial Integration:** Achieving the comprehensive integration of the Ukrainian defence-industrial complex (DIC) into European supply chains.
- **Extended Deterrence:** Providing nuclear deterrence guarantees (the “French umbrella”) for the EU.

- **Diplomatic Advocacy:** Intensive lobbying for Ukraine’s expedited NATO membership.

Positive Implications for Ukraine:

- **Euro-Atlantic Integration:** France’s dominant position within the EU may accelerate Ukraine’s path toward membership in Western institutions.
- **Sovereignty Support:** Paris may emerge as a more assertive advocate for Ukraine’s territorial integrity.
- **Mediation Efforts:** France could revitalise its mediatory role (formerly the Normandy Format) to facilitate a peaceful resolution to Russian armed aggression.
- **International Prestige:** France’s proactive support enhances Ukraine’s global standing and diplomatic leverage.
- **Economic & Tech Synergy:** Strengthening bilateral economic ties through capital investment and technology transfer.
- **In-Country Capabilities:** The deployment of French service centres (e.g., KNDS, Thales) directly within Ukrainian territory for equipment maintenance.
- **Energy Transition:** Provision of technological assistance for Ukraine’s transition to a “green” economy and increased investment in renewable energy sources.

Strategic Risks for Ukraine:

- **Political Dependency:** High reliance on Paris’s political will may compromise Ukraine’s autonomous negotiating position.
- **Transatlantic Friction:** Potential tensions between France and the US may compel Ukraine to navigate complex “choice-of-side” dilemmas.
- **Institutional Volatility:** Increased dependence on EU decision-making processes, which remain susceptible to shifting political climates in Europe.
- **Resource Competition:** Heightened competition with other member states for European investment and strategic support.
- **Compromise Vulnerability:** During diplomatic negotiations, France may pursue compromises that do not fully align with Ukraine’s core national interests.
- **Transition Costs:** The “green” economic transition will necessitate substantial financial outlays, posing a significant challenge to the Ukrainian economy.

Scenario 2. Realistic: “Strategic Exhaustion”

Under this scenario, France maintains its current trajectory regarding European strategic autonomy, characterized by a lack of significant breakthroughs but also an absence of retreat (Ministère des Armées, 2024). Paris remains a pivotal, yet not the sole, leader in the security domain. Support for Ukraine persists strictly within the parameters of the bilateral security agreements ratified until 2030.

Strategic Actions by France:

- **Technical Transition:** Overseeing the gradual rearmament of the Ukrainian Armed Forces to align with French and NATO technological standards.
- **Regional Presence:** Maintaining limited military contingents in Romania as part of NATO’s forward presence and regional stability efforts.
- **Diplomatic Support:** Providing consistent diplomatic backing for Ukraine within the EU framework, albeit without exerting radical pressure on NATO regarding expedited membership.

Strategic Risks for Ukraine:

- **Decision-Making Latency:** The risk of “too little, too late”—slow administrative and political processes that may fail to meet the urgent demands of the frontline.

- **Leadership Rivalry:** Persistent competition with Germany for regional hegemony, which could potentially stifle or decelerate broader pan-European security initiatives (Gnesotto, N., 2024).

Scenario 3. Pessimistic: “Internal Fragmentation”

In this scenario, a profound domestic political crisis leads to a “**leadership paralysis**”. Paris becomes consumed by internal unrest, forcing the government to curtail its external leadership ambitions. Internal instability or a worsening economic crisis compels France to refocus on domestic issues and deficit management, effectively delegating Eastern European security matters to other regional actors—a direct consequence of the 2024–2025 government crises. Paris shifts its strategic focus toward protecting narrow national interests in the Mediterranean and Africa (Hecker, M., & Tenenbaum, É., 2024).

Strategic Actions by France:

- **Erosion of Regional Status:** The forfeiture of regional leadership to Poland and Germany.
- **Aided Reduction:** A decrease in military assistance to Ukraine under the pretext of “replenishing national arsenals.”
- **Industrial Protectionism:** French protectionist policies may obstruct Ukraine’s rapid rearmament outside of French technological standards (Gnesotto, N., 2024).
- **Strategic Pivot:** A return to the policy of “balancing” with the Russian Federation; lobbying for a frozen conflict to facilitate European economic recovery.
- **Financial Transition:** A shift from direct military aid to loans and joint investment schemes.

Threats to Ukraine:

- **The “Munich-2” Risk:** The danger of diplomatic arrangements being reached behind Kyiv's back.
- **Logistical Disruption:** The potential cessation of critical spare parts for French-made systems (e.g., *Caesar* self-propelled howitzers, *SCALP* missiles).
- **Political Constraints:** While support may formally continue, its tempo slows significantly due to critical budget deficits and pressure from the opposition (particularly the *Rassemblement National*).
- **“Silent Revision”:** A clandestine downgrading of support, including restrictions on the delivery of high-tech weaponry (e.g., *SCALP*, *Mirage*).
- **Social Pressure:** Intensified demands regarding the “normalization” of refugee status and the reduction of social support.

General Analysis for Ukraine: Advantages, Risks, and Threats

Advantages

- **Nuclear Deterrence:** France remains the only EU member state prepared to discuss the application of its nuclear deterrent as a broader pan-European security factor.
- **Technological Transfer:** The French defence-industrial complex (notably *Dassault* and *Nexter*) is highly autonomous. Joint production of UAVs and artillery (e.g., *Caesar* self-propelled howitzers) within Ukraine establishes a foundation for the future of the Ukrainian defence industry.
- **Diplomatic Advocacy:** Paris serves as a key “advocate” for Ukraine’s EU accession, utilizing this stance as a mechanism to bolster its own influence within Brussels.

Risks

- **Domestic Political Volatility:** The surging popularity of right-wing factions, typically skeptical of increased military expenditure, creates the risk of a sharp policy pivot following future elections.
- **“War Economy” vs. Social Stability:** The French public exhibits high levels of pessimism (85% as of 2026). Further escalation of defence spending may trigger large-scale industrial strikes and social unrest.

- **Strategic Overextension:** French attention is divided between the Ukrainian theatre and the Sahel (Africa), where Russia continues its hybrid expansion.

Threats

- **Hybrid Warfare on French Soil:** Russian-led sabotage at defence facilities (as documented in 2024–2025) and cyberattacks may compel Paris to prioritize domestic security over external support.

- **Phasing Out of Humanitarian Assistance:** In 2026, France initiated a transition from “emergency aid” to a policy of “financial autonomy” for Ukrainians, resulting in a sharp reduction in housing subsidies and social benefits.

Table 1: Comparative Table: French Impact on Ukraine

Sector	Positive factor	Critical threat
Military	Supply of Mirage aircraft and air defense	Ammunition shortage due to financial degradation
Political	Support for EU membership	Return to the policy of “saving Putin’s face”
Economical	Joint ventures (KNDS)	Protectionism regarding Ukrainian agricultural products
Social	Training of Ukrainian military	Deportation of refugees due to changes in legislation

Source: developed by the author

General Risks and Threats to Ukraine

- **Political Reorientation:** A shift in France’s political trajectory may lead to a fundamental reassessment of its bilateral relations with Ukraine.

- **Geopolitical Competition:** Ukraine may face intensified competition for the attention and resources of major global actors, including the United States, Germany, and Russia.

- **Strategic Diversion:** Domestic political crises within France could divert the leadership’s focus from foreign policy, thereby diminishing Paris’s influence and agency on the international stage.

Table 2: Risk and Opportunity Matrix for Ukraine (2026–2030)

Indicator	Scenario 1 (Optimistic)	Scenario 2 (Realistic)	Scenario 3 (Pessimistic)
Military Aid Level	Exponential growth	Stable, moderate	Sharp reduction
Security Guarantees	Nuclear / Coalition-based	Bilateral agreements	Purely formal / Symbolic
Impact on Russia	Maximum deterrence	Deterrence without escalation	Search for compromise
Primary Threat	Paris-Washington conflict	Bureaucratic stagnation	Diplomatic isolation

Source: developed by the author

Concluding Remarks and Strategic Recommendations

Scenario 1 represents the most constructive pathway for Ukraine. However, its realization demands proactive and continuous engagement from Ukrainian diplomacy and intelligence services with the broader French elite—moving beyond the current administration to mitigate the risk of a shift toward Scenario 3. In 2026, France must be viewed as a strategic “asset” that necessitates rigorous and ongoing risk management.

For Ukraine, France in 2026 stands as its most resolute yet concurrently its most volatile partner. The national strategy must be predicated on anchoring the French defence-industrial base within the Ukrainian market. Establishing joint manufacturing facilities will render continued

support for Ukraine economically advantageous for France, ensuring continuity of policy regardless of the political leadership within the Élysée Palace.

In conclusion, France's development as a regional leader presents a complex duality of opportunities and threats for Ukraine. It is imperative for Kyiv to cultivate long-term, mutually beneficial relations with Paris while simultaneously diversifying its foreign policy vectors and working assiduously to enhance its own domestic potential and national resilience.

Discussion

The findings indicate that the development of the French Republic as a regional leader is nonlinear and shaped by the complex interaction of internal and external factors. On the one hand, France seeks to strengthen its role within the European Union through the concept of strategic autonomy, which may reinforce Europe's security architecture and support for Ukraine. On the other hand, domestic political fragmentation and economic constraints limit the effective implementation of these ambitions.

A critical assessment shows that the optimistic scenario assumes a high level of coordination among European states; however, this assumption may be overly optimistic given existing divergences among key actors, particularly with Germany. The realistic scenario appears the most plausible, as it accounts for institutional inertia and resource constraints.

The pessimistic scenario highlights the risks of political destabilization in France and a potential revision of its policy toward Russia, posing significant threats to Ukraine. At the same time, the scenario-based approach has inherent limitations, particularly in accounting for unforeseen "black swan" events.

Therefore, for Ukraine, the key task is not only to adapt to possible scenarios but also to actively influence the development of bilateral relations with France in order to minimize risks and maximize strategic advantages.

Conclusion

France, as a leading power within the European Union, plays a decisive role in shaping European policy, particularly in relation to Ukraine. Its potential emergence as a reinforced regional leader carries both positive and negative implications for Kyiv's strategic interests.

France may seek to consolidate its leadership within the EU by enhancing its military capabilities, ensuring economic stability, and increasing its diplomatic activity. Such a trajectory could result in a more assertive and coordinated European policy toward Russia and sustained support for Ukraine. Conversely, a focus on resolving protracted domestic challenges-including economic stagnation, social tension, and the migration crisis-could lead to a diminished emphasis on foreign policy and a reduction in both French and EU-wide economic assistance to Ukraine.

Furthermore, a change in France's political leadership may trigger a significant shift in its foreign policy orientation toward Russia and Ukraine. This presents unpredictable consequences for Ukraine, ranging from revised approaches to conflict resolution to a potential pursuit of closer dialogue with the Kremlin, which may occur at the expense of Ukrainian national interests.

In the economic sphere, France's strengthening as a regional leader may intensify competition for Ukraine, particularly within the agricultural sector where France maintains a dominant position. This necessitates a proactive strategy to manage potential trade frictions.

Given these factors, Ukraine must remain prepared for various developmental scenarios within France and actively work to bolster its own standing on the international stage. Specifically:

- **Strategic Monitoring:** It is imperative to continuously monitor political and economic trends within France to accurately assess emerging risks and threats.
- **Bilateral Development:** Future research and diplomatic efforts should focus on defining specific vectors for strengthening bilateral relations with France and other EU member states to

ensure the sustained support of Ukrainian interests.

Leadership Vigilance: Considering France's profound ambitions for European leadership, its international actions must be meticulously analyzed to anticipate shifts in the regional security architecture.

Funding

This study received no specific financial support.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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