

# Multilateralism as Forced Necessity? Evolution of the French Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa: Continuity and Change<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*French foreign policy discourse during the presidency of E. Macron was often based on the idea of multilateralism as a pillar of the international order. Nevertheless, the motives that governed the French approach were far from idealism. The purpose of this article is to analyze the relationship between the rhetoric of multilateralism and the practice of the Fifth Republic's policy in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2017–21. Conclusions are drawn from the documents of the French ministries, texts of French laws and the speeches of the president. The analysis proceeds by exploring the evolution of Paris' approach to the three main "pillars" of its African policy: the French military presence, the influence on the western and Central African countries' financial system (the former CFA franc), and, finally, French aid to development. In his policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa, Macron showed clear intention to modernize the practices of the past and to inject more multilateralism into them. The French president wanted to strengthen the European and global dimensions of the relations between the Fifth Republic and Africa; he aimed to put these relations into a broader framework, including the European Union (EU), the United Nations (UN), the African Union, and other international organizations and fora. Macron also pursued the reform of the CFA franc, which gave more authority to the West African countries themselves. He validated the evolution in the sphere of aid to development, which resulted in more convergence between the French methods and the international recommendations, though at the same time Paris persisted in its preference for bilateral mechanisms of aid. In general, the emphasis put on multilateralism was a French method to maximize the benefits from its African policy and to minimize its costs.*

**Keywords:** France, Africa, multilateralism, international relations, Sahel

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## Introduction

The rhetoric of multilateralism plays an important role in contemporary French foreign policy. Addressing the ambassadors of the Fifth Republic on 29 August 2017, President E. Macron urged them to “convey worldwide the message of a stronger, more united, more open France, keen to hold aloft, wherever it can, the flame of multilateral action, political dialogue and crisis

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resolution” [Macron, 2017a]. According to scholars, Macron is trying to base future international relations on “inclusive multilateralism” [Obichkina, 2018, p. 141].

This article investigates to what degree the rhetoric of multilateralism, actively used in French diplomacy, corresponds to the actual foreign policy of the Fifth Republic in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2017–21.

The choice of this sub-region is explained by the fact that Paris continues to perceive it as being within the French sphere of influence. Nevertheless, the trends of international transformation, which were already evident in the 1990s, indicate that French influence and presence is weakening. The leadership of the Fifth Republic has to look for new instruments of foreign policy. Paris interacts actively with the countries of Sub-Saharan Africa within international organizations and other international institutions and formats (the United Nations (UN), the International Organisation of La Francophonie (IOF), Africa-France summits, and so on). This circumstance enhances the academic interest in exploring the challenges of multilateralism in the relations between the Fifth Republic and African states. If contextualized properly, the experience of French African policy could be of interest to Russian diplomacy as well.

Various scholars have already researched the contemporary African policy of France [Filippov, 2020; Gaulme, 2019; Khalitova, 2020]. However, they have rarely focused on the question of how Macron’s diplomacy correlates with the transformations of French African policy in the medium term. Typically, questions about the reasons for Paris’ emphasis on multilateralism have not been asked nor answered. The purpose of this article is to fill in this gap.

The three traditional pillars of French influence in Africa are analyzed in this article and the attempts of Paris to modernize them are discussed. The first pillar is France’s military presence (44% of all French military interventions between 1962 and the end of the 2010s took place in Sub-Saharan Africa) [Pannier, Schmitt, 2019, p. 901]. The second pillar relates to the currency system in West and Central Africa (former CFA franc)<sup>2</sup>, which was de-facto regulated until recently by the French Treasury; the final pillar is French development aid [Gaulme, 2019, p. 7]. With reference to multilateralism in the African policy of Paris, there are three main components. The first is the French tendency to engage partners/allies in military interventions in Africa and the desire of Paris to base these on the UN mandate. The second component covers French policy aimed at promoting dialogue with Africa via the European Union (EU) and the IOF, and through the interaction between the UN and the African Union (AU). Finally, the third component encapsulates the growing tendency of French diplomacy, while rendering development assistance to African countries, to use the principles proposed by multilateral institutions and international organizations, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

## E. Macron and Modernization of French African Policy

Judging by the first steps of President Macron, it is already possible to conclude that he rates Africa amongst his foreign policy priorities, after Europe and the Mediterranean [Obichkina, 2018, p. 140]. Macron’s decision, dated 29 August 2017, to create a Presidential Council for

<sup>2</sup> Introduced in December 1945 as “franc of the French colonies of Africa” in 1958, it was renamed the “franc of the French Community of Africa” and, finally, the “franc of the African Financial Community” (*Communauté financière africaine*, CFA). Before 2020, the term “CFA franc” included, as a rule, two currencies issued by two different institutions. The first circulated in the eight countries of the West African Economic and Monetary Union, and the second, in six countries of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa.

Africa spoke to that. At the same time, this step was relevant to the broader framework of diplomatic innovations proposed by the new French president. He was eager to broaden the interstate relationship by engaging members of the business community and civil society. French and African entrepreneurs and social activists participated on the Presidential Council, which was entitled to give recommendations to Macron [Presidential Council for Africa, 2021]. Confronting the growing number of critics raising accusations that French African policy was “neocolonial,” the president of the Fifth Republic aimed to increase France’s soft power by renewing its instruments. Pursuing this aim, he appealed to dynamic and young groups in African societies.

New French interest in Africa originated not only from a positive stimulus but also from fears as well. If the “communist menace” pushed Paris to be actively engaged in Africa during the Cold War, in the 2010s, the growing influence of China, Turkey and Russia played the same role. On 18 February 2021, soon after the new French law on development aid was deliberated in the National Assembly, Minister for Foreign Affairs J.-Y. Le Drian spoke rather openly during a radio broadcast, stating that “France is returning to the game.” He did not conceal the fact that the “Chinese factor” was one of the key motives for Paris: “We entered the war for the model of development and for influence against China” [France Inter, 2021].

Macron presented the key features of his African policy during a speech at the University of Ouagadougou on 28 November 2017 [2017c]. The president indicated his desire to reform French diplomacy in Africa and to develop a continental approach, that is, to change the former emphasis put on the relationship with the francophone African countries and to reject the strict conceptual divide between the states north of the Sahara and those on the south, which had long existed in the French official mind. Macron placed a bet on the new multilateralism of Paris diplomacy and on the reinvigoration of relations between the EU and Africa.

The impact of these ideas was felt in Macron’s appeal to develop the “Afro-European strategy” [The Great Continent, 2020]. Read pragmatically, the French president tried to share the “burden” of African policy with his European partners. “French priorities in Africa” were at the centre of the European Intervention Initiative proposed by Macron in his speech on 26 September 2017 [Pannier, Schmitt, 2019, p. 910].

During another presentation linked to the topic of African policy at the UN General Assembly on 20 September 2017, Macron stressed the idea that “in the Sahel, we are all now committed.” He bore in mind “the United Nations, the countries of the region within MINUSMA<sup>3</sup> and the G5 joint force,<sup>4</sup> the European Union and its member states...”. Macron envisaged even broader plans: “We need coordination in the management of crises, with the European Union, the African Union, and sub-regional organizations that are key players” [2017b]. In a year, Macron urged the UN General Assembly to support the African initiative aimed to promote cooperation between the AU and the UN in peacekeeping missions [2018].

It is possible to find similar ideas in the strategic review of defence and national security prepared by the French Ministry of Armed Forces in October 2017 [p. 22], and also in the update published in February 2021 [p. 12]. An expert on African issues from the French Institute of International Relations, F. Gaulme, gave a somewhat more pessimistic view. He thought that the idea to create “solid multilateral relations between Europe and Africa with AU participation” “lacked realism” [Gaulme, 2019, p. 4].

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali. Established by the UN Security Council Resolution 2100 of 25 April 2013. In July 2018, Macron did not exclude the possibility that the African Union forces would play the MINUSMA role in the future and would replace the G5 joint force [Gaulme, 2019, p. 28].

<sup>4</sup> The framework for interstate cooperation in the Sahel region was established in February 2014 by Burkina-Faso, Mauritania, Mali and Chad. As its priority, G5 Sahel has the struggle against international terrorism and promotion of stability in the region.

From Macron's point of view, the support given by Paris to the reform of the AU should contribute to Europe-Africa dialogue. The intention to reform the AU was voiced in 2016 and materialized in the decisions taken at the two summits in Addis Ababa, on 17–18 November 2018 and 6–7 February 2021. The reforms were aimed at strengthening the AU's executive body (Commission), making the financing of the organization by its members more effective, and finally, stimulating development aid policy [Nemchenko, 2019]. Support given by Macron to these processes had the additional task of helping normalize the relations between France and Rwanda, the latter being under the shadow of the 1994 Tutsi genocide even now. The Rwandan president, P. Kagame, who chaired the AU in January 2018–February 2019, was a protagonist of the above-mentioned reforms.

## Linkage Between Socioeconomic and Strategic Issues in the African Policy of E. Macron

In spite of Macron's declarations about the abandonment of the traditional pillars in Africa, it is more correct to speak about continuing modernization of the system. A current comparison, which was made by the media and scholars between Macron and V. Giscard d'Estaing – the two youngest presidents of the Fifth Republic – operates rather well in this case. In his desire to widen the scope of French African policy beyond the francophone sphere of influence (the so-called '*pré carré*') and to enforce trade and business dimensions of Paris diplomacy, centrist Macron inherited some conceptions from his predecessor [Bach, 1984].

Illustrating Macron's approach, it is noteworthy to mention the Elysée Palace initiative, which resulted in a summit on the financing of African economies in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, convened in Paris on 18 May 2021. Proceeding in a hybrid format (offline and online), this meeting assembled representatives of nineteen African states (10 of which were not francophone), five European countries, the EU, Japan, and the officials of international organizations and institutions, including the UN, the IMF, the OECD, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the WB. However, the announcement by Macron, who spoke about the "new deal" in development aid to Africa, was not accompanied by "any firm commitments" from France [de Vergès, 2021]. The main responsibility went to the IMF's decision, entered into force on 23 August 2021, according to which the Fund issued \$650 billion equivalent in new special drawing rights (SDRs). African countries were entitled to SDRs worth \$33 billion.

Macron's approach to the IOF also reflected the new emphasis put by Paris on economics. This organization interests the French president "especially as an instrument, and not the key one, to strengthen the economic positions of his country" [Zueva, Timofeev, 2018, pp. 88–9]. According to this logic, the expansion of the French language was a springboard for French business activities.

In his military policy in Africa, Macron's mixture of continuity and novelty showed one more time. He inherited the antiterrorist Barkhane operation from President F. Hollande and continued its realization, trying simultaneously to internationalize this costly undertaking. A signal that Macron rated Barkhane high on his agenda was given during his first African visit. On 19 May 2017, few days after taking the office of the president, Macron made a symbolic visit to the French military base in Gao (Mali).

According to the 2017 strategic defence review, the Sahel was regarded by Paris as "a high priority in France's fight against terrorism and trafficking as well as in the protection of French expatriates, the Sahel-Sahara region risks becoming an entrenched hotbed of jihadism" [Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2017, p. 21]. Though the review did not reference it, there was an additional challenge to France posed by the growing discontent of many Africans regarding the

French military presence on the continent. According to an observer, Macron “poorly hid his irritation” and accused several African leaders of playing a double game. They used the “anti-colonial card” to gain more popularity inside their countries, desiring at the same time to conserve Paris as the supplier of regional security [Pigeaud, 2020, p. 12].

The rumors that Macron wanted to reduce the French military contingent engaged in the Barkhane (which numbered around 5,100 soldiers), which circulated on the eve of the Group of 5 (G5) Sahel and its partners summit in N’Djamena (18 February 2021), were not confirmed [Duclos, 2021]. Nevertheless, it seems that there were some basis for them. On 10 June, Macron announced the “deep transformation” of the French military presence in the Sahel and its reorientation toward “international alliance including the regional states” [Vincent, 2021]. Anonymous sources indicated that there were plans to reduce the French contingent to 3,500 soldiers in 2022 and to 2,500 in 2023 [Vincent, 2021]. However, the new announcement made by Macron on 13 July sounded even more serious: “Operation Barkhane will be terminated in the first trimester of 2022, but we continue our efforts further...” [de Vernet, 2021].

The reaction of Paris to Russia’s rapprochement with the new Malian authorities, who gained power after a military coup on 24 May 2021 was indicative of the ambivalence of the French approach to Sub-Saharan Africa. The Elysée Palace was anxious about the Russo-Malian negotiations concerning the dispatch of the Russian private military company’s troops in Mali (the news about these negotiations became publically known in September). On 15 November, during the telephone call between the presidents of France and Russia, Macron raised this question again and indicated that the presence of the Russian units would have serious consequences [Young Africa, 2021].

Nevertheless, Macron’s discontent about the policy of the new Malian authorities aligned with his declarations about further reducing the French military presence in Mali. On 8 October 2021, during the Africa-France summit in Montpellier, the French president announced the closure of the two military bases in the north of Mali. He further warned about the continuing disengagement of the Fifth Republic from the country [RTL, 2021]. This declaration could be explained partially by reasons related to domestic French politics, that is, by the desire of Macron to weaken opponents who stressed the serious costs of military operations in Africa. It was especially important in view of the approaching presidential elections. At the same time, by this gesture, Paris tried to press Bamako and to make it more compliant.

The lack of full support from the allies made the French position worse. If the U.S. backed France in criticizing Russian activities in Mali, Paris’ disengagement did not find understanding in Washington [Lynch, Detsch, 2021]. Thus, the French stance in Sub-Saharan Africa is contradictory. Looking at the growing presence of China, Turkey and Russia in the sub-region, Paris wanted to conserve the influence there but lacked the necessary resources and also the complete support of the allies.

By promoting multilateralism and arguing for internationalization of the security “supply” in the Sahel, the French leadership hoped to save money and to secure its interests in the collective undertaking. It is possible to agree with the idea that the search for allies by Paris operates according to the well-known maxim: “necessity is the mother of invention” [Pannier, Schmitt, 2019, p. 907]. The Brussels conference of donors supporting the Barkhane operation, which took place in February 2018, could be cited as an example of the French success. The summit decided to grant €414 million (one-year expenses for Barkhane are estimated at €400 million). The main donors were the EU (€100 million), Saudi Arabia (€100 million), the G5 Sahel (€50 million), and the U.S. (€48.8 million) [Barbière, Flausch, 2018]. Playing a crucial role during the military operations in the Sahel, Paris hoped that the WB and the EU would lead in the field of development aid to the Sahel countries.

The aim to engage partners (especially, Germany) and international institutions in development aid was one of the key reasons for the French initiative, resulting in the creation of the Sahel Alliance in July 2017. It numbers 25 members and 11 observers, and in 2020 the Alliance supported projects to a total amount of €21.8 billion [The Sahel Alliance, 2021]. France was not the leader in these undertakings, and its share (10%) in the donors' projects realized in Mali in 2017–8 was less than those of the EU (17%) and the International Development Association (24%). In the case of Niger, disproportions were even greater. The ratio was 4.7 (France), 20 (EU), and 20 (International Development Association) [Pye, 2021].

Pursuing the Europeanization of French African policy, Macron placed a bet on Task Force Takuba, a coalition of European forces created to help the Malian army in the struggle against terrorism. This task force, created on 27 March 2020, included representatives from Sweden, Estonia, the Netherlands, Portugal, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, and the Czech Republic [Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2021, p. 33]. However, the high expectations about it did not fully materialize. If, in February 2021, in N'Djamena, Macron spoke about the programmed strength of the Takuba forces at the level of 2,000 soldiers, by June they numbered only 600 [Sauvage, 2021]. Paris was also confronted with the difficulties of coordinating the multilateral activities. Macron's attempts to enlarge the G5 Sahel by including Senegal – a key French ally and an important regional actor – met with opposition from Mali and Mauritania and, finally, failed.

There was an additional contradiction in French African policy. Paris wanted simultaneously to secure its traditional strategic interests in the region and to reform its diplomacy in Africa. Macron's ideas about democratization in the region, though he was careful not to tell Africans "what the rule of law entails" [Macron, 2017c], were pushed back when there was a serious strategic stake. For example, Paris tried not to strongly criticize the political regime in Chad, which was far from meeting democratic standards, but remained one of the key French allies in the framework of operation Barkhane [Duclos, 2021].

## Bilateralism and Multilateralism in the French Development Aid Policy

The conflictual coexistence of novelty and tradition characterized other components of Macron's African policy as well. The emphasis put by the French president on socio-economics issues and his promotion of multilateralism did not always go hand in hand. In an interview on 12 November 2020, Macron stressed the idea that "the key question in relations with Africa is African economic development, peace and security" [The Great Continent, 2020]. Nevertheless, the French approach to the problems of development was traditional and bilateral in its character.

The French law on development aid, dated 4 August 2021, programmed a growth in the amount of aid. Benefiting partially from taxes on financial transactions, it should rise to 0.55% of gross domestic product (GDP), as compared to 0.37% in 2017 [Law of 4 August, 2021]. Nevertheless, the intent of the law was even greater and amounted to a reconceptualization of French aid to development policy, continuing the earlier attempts to modernize it [Khalitova, 2020, pp. 123–30].

The law of 4 August consolidated several directions of reform. The key among them were as follows. First, the law acknowledged the necessity of harmonizing French aid to development policy, on the one hand, and to similar UN and AU programmes and multilateral initiatives in the sphere of biodiversity and climate, including the Paris Climate Agreement (2015) on the other. Second, the text established the promise that France would make efforts to increase

the amount of development aid up to 0.7% of GDP. Third, the law emphasized the idea that France should interact not only with the governments of recipient states, but also with local and regional authorities, non-governmental organizations, and business communities. Fourth, provisions would be made to create a mechanism to confiscate the property/possessions of foreigners in France purchased with funds obtained through illegal activities. The value of such assets could be returned to the countries of consignment. Finally, the law transformed the structure of French aid to development, which in the few past years “resembled more and more the aid of other donors and took the form of grants and not of loans...” [Zueva, Timofeev, 2018, p. 88].

Another direction in which French aid policy evolved was the growing convergence between the governing principles of this policy and the recommendations of the OECD Development Assistance Committee. Though the OECD and the committee headquarters are located in Paris, “the successive governments of the Fifth Republic paradoxically have paid little attention to it up to recent times” [Gaulme, 2019, p. 21]. In 2018, the Directorate-General for Global Affairs, Culture, Education and International Development (within the structure of the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs) stressed the necessity of following OECD criteria while assessing the troubled spheres in recipient states that need assistance [Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018, p. 8].

Though the law of 4 August contained new propositions, it inherited some traditional features of French aid policy as well. For example, the main recipients of aid were 18 African countries (fifteen of which were francophone) and Haiti. In 2019, the distribution of aid by the French Development Agency (AFD) painted a similar picture. The main recipients were the francophone states of West and Central Africa, with Ethiopia as a significant exception to the rule (it received €158 million, approximately 10% of the global amount). In 2020, 39% of bilateral French aid to development also went to Africa, and 80% of the African quota was transferred to Sub-Saharan states [Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2021]. In general, from 2012, the AFD invested €5.3 billion in the Sahel countries, with €471 million invested in 2020 alone [Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2020].

## CFA Franc Reform: Traditions and Innovations

The CFA franc reform, another important feature of Macron’s African policy, was, in essence, an already familiar mixture of continuity and innovation. In 2017, the French president did not consider this question to be topical. Thus, his signing, with the president of Côte d’Ivoire, A. Ouattara, of an agreement on CFA franc reform in Abidjan on 21 December 2019 was rather surprising [Pigeaud, 2020, p. 12]. As it seems, the initiative came from Ouattara. He expected that the new currency, as an alternative to the CFA franc, would circulate in all countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). However, such plans were met with criticism from the Nigerian leadership, which had plans to base the new currency on the Nigerian naira [Toulemonde, 2021].

The Abidjan agreement envisaged several reforms of the currency of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). This currency received the new name – “eco” – instead of the CFA franc. The agreement reduced, although did not totally liquidate, France’s influence on the monetary system of the WAEMU. West African countries preserved the fixed parity between the successor of the CFA franc and the euro (1€ = 655.95 eco) and free conversion between them, which was guaranteed by Paris. At the same time, they freed themselves from the obligation to keep 50% of their currency reserves in the French Treasury. However, the clause about the exit of French representatives from the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO) did not signify that Paris had lost its instruments of influence entirely. The choice

of “independent and qualified” member of the BCEAO’s monetary committee would be coordinated with France, and if there are high risks for stability of the currency system, France retained the right to appoint a representative (with the advisory vote) to the board of directors [Bascher, 2021]. Nevertheless, the prospect of independent monetary regulation inside the ECOWAS could seriously question French financial influence in West Africa.

There were different reactions to these innovations among French elite and academic circles. Some remarks reflected the desire to quit from the “special” monetary relations with West and Central Africa even further and to transform them into “pure” business. In April 2021, the director of the French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs, P. Boniface, gave the following estimate of CFA franc reform: “The Elysée Palace did not succeed in breaking the monetary link between the countries of the zone of franc, which was embodied in the CFA franc. The African leaders do not want to embark on an adventure of financial sovereignty and prefer the comfort provided by the parity with the euro, even if France quit the bodies which govern the West-African currency” [Boniface, 2021].

Thus, the answer to the question about the degree of novelty in Macron’s African policy depends seriously on the point of departure. If compared to the Gaullist heritage, the changes are evident. However, comparing the activities of Macron to the previous attempts of Paris to modernize the French-African relationship, beginning with Giscard d’Estaing, it is possible to see continuity in the search for renewal. As French expert and former ambassador, M. Duclos, underlined, “along with ambitious Macron, innovator and supporter of the global approach to Africa, there is classical Macron, cautious and realist, who manifests himself in the relations with West and Central Africa...” [Duclos, 2021].

### **Conclusion**

This analysis of French policy in Sub-Saharan Africa in 2017–21 showed the desire of Paris to promote the elements of multilateralism. President Macron tried to strengthen the European and international dimensions of the French-African relationship; he wanted to include more substantially into this dialogue such actors as the EU, the UN, the AE, and other international organizations and institutions. These innovations, which were partially translated into practice, touched all three pillars of the African policy of Paris. Continuing the military operations in Africa, France aimed to draw other EU members and the AU states into them and to simultaneously reduce the French presence, shifting more burden to the G5 Sahel. During the CFA reform, Paris pursued a similar logic and gave more responsibilities to West African countries. Reforming its aid to development policy, French leadership went closer to international standards and criteria, though conserving some features of the traditional emphasis on a bilateral approach to African states.

As a rule, the above-mentioned tendencies of Macron’s African policy had some predecessors during the previous presidencies of the Fifth Republic. Thus, it is more productive to speak not about the “rupture” with the traditions of French African diplomacy, but rather about transformations within the framework of continuity.

The factors, which stimulated innovations in the French approach, were linked chiefly to economic and international policy. These reasons governed the degree of the French interest in Africa. Such factors, such as competition for influence with China, Turkey and Russia and security interdependence in the field of terrorism and migration between the Europe and the Sahel, pushed Paris to pay attention to Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, the shortage of economic and military resources stimulated the Fifth Republic to search for the means to share the burden of its African policy with allies and regional actors. Already, in 2010, the British expert T. Chafer, while analyzing the diplomacy of Paris in Africa, noticed the important fact that

“it becomes now more complicated to rely on the bilateral approach, because such policy is too expensive. Thus, it is necessary to create the partnerships in order to share the expenses as in the military sphere, as well as in the aid to development policy” [Chafer, Cumming, 2010, p. 57]. Largely, multilateralism for Paris is an instrument to maximize the dividends from its African policy and to minimize the costs.

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