

France and the EU Strategic Autonomy: Responding to US Retrenchment in Middle East

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Abstract

United States (US) policy retrenchment in the Middle East—exemplified by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) withdrawal, unilateral approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and inconsistent military engagement—has destabilised long-standing regional balances. At the same time, external actors such as China and Russia are expanding their footprint: China through commercially driven energy and infrastructure investments, and Russia via military presence in Syria and strategic alignment with Iran. With this backdrop, Europe stands at a critical juncture: unable to rely on US reliability, yet deeply exposed to the consequences of Middle Eastern instability—including migration, energy disruption, and security spillovers. Hence, this paper seeks to argue from a realist perspective that a France-led European strategy is a geostrategic necessity. France should spearhead an EU framework that has European interests at its core as the push for strategic autonomy increases to push for outcomes in Europe's favour as a region deeply affected by Middle Eastern conflicts.

Keywords: European Union, France, Middle East, US retrenchment, China, strategic autonomy, Iran, Gulf security

1. Introduction

The Trump administration's actions in the Middle East have created a fragile policy with weak links across its biggest ticket items whether it be the Iranian nuclear threat or the Israel-Palestine peace plan. Key decisions — notably the 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) followed by the maximum pressure strategy that has included direct strikes on nuclear facilities in June 2025, the unilateral “Peace to Prosperity” approach to Israel-Palestine and a 20 point peace plan rife with

ambiguity, already falling through, the inability to contain the Houthis in the Red Sea, and erratic engagement in Syria, and the Gulf. These among numerous White House decisions have fueled uncertainty— not just in the Middle East, but also for its Western Allies. This retrenchment and “America First” unilateralism has produced a structural vacuum, reducing US legitimacy as a middle actor that can facilitate long-standing negotiations towards a stringent and secure future for Middle Eastern conflicts beyond

quick win diplomatic agreements that claim to have solved over 7 global conflicts.

External powers have moved to exploit parts of this vacuum. China, though less militarily assertive, has expanded its economic reach through infrastructure investments, energy partnerships, and trade — and is increasingly signaling diplomatic ambitions. It has brokered internal deals within Palestine and facilitated Saudi-Iran negotiations all while maintaining a neutral stance and furthering its trade motives and greater investments in the region. Russia, meanwhile, continues to project power in Syria and through its Iran ties. Yet neither Beijing nor Moscow offers a coherent, stabilising security framework for the region. Meanwhile, regional dynamics themselves are shifting: Iran is reasserting its nuclear strategy and alliances; Gulf states are redefining their strategic calculus; and non-state actors remain potent. Europe cannot ignore these trends. In realist terms, instability in the Middle East directly threatens European security through migration, energy vulnerabilities, terrorism, and political spillovers. To safeguard its interests, Europe must engage more decisively.

France is uniquely placed to lead. It combines diplomatic reach, military capacity, historical ties, and a reputation for respecting regional agency. Crucially, France supports regionally-led decision-making, even as it retains the ability to act as an external facilitator where local capacity or frameworks fall short. This dual role makes a France-led EU strategy both legitimate and effective. This

paper argues that a France-led EU strategy is not moralistic but strategically necessary.

Ultimately, the primary Research Question of this paper is ‘How can a France led EU enhance its strategic autonomy and better address conflicts in the Middle East in response to US retrenchment?’

The research objectives of this paper are to assess the implications of US retrenchment for European security and strategic interests; analyse the impact of external powers—China and Russia—on the Middle Eastern strategic environment; demonstrate France’s unique role in being able to further the EU’s capacity to exercise strategic autonomy in the region for its own strategic goals; and finally to propose realist, EU-led policy measures to addressing Middle Eastern vulnerabilities

2. Background Analysis: The Strategic Consequences of US Retrenchment

2.1. The JCPOA Exit

The United States’ unilateral exit from the JCPOA reverted much of the progress made in the attempt to contain Iran’s nuclear programme. This exit undermined the EU’s strategic interest in containing nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and signaled to Tehran that US guarantees are unreliable. The Middle East Institute’s “US Policy in the Middle East: Third Quarter 2025 Report Card” suggests that US policy toward Iran remains inconsistent and that America’s long-term

strategic goals are unclear.¹ Such uncertainty incentivises Iran to deepen its strategic autonomy and seek partnerships outside the Western sphere— and finds extensive economic backing with over 90% of its oil purchases and security support given their 25 year strategic partnership with China.²

For Europe, particularly the EU, this retreat erodes one of its security buffers. The 2025 National Strategic Review explicitly highlights Iran as “the main strategic challenge” in the Middle East for France.³ The concerns include its nuclear and missiles programme, support for proxy militias (“Axis of Resistance” doctrine: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Quds Force coordinates Hezbollah, Iraq’s Badr Organization/PMF units, Houthi rebels), role in the spiralling Iran-Israel conflict, etc— all of which destabilise French strategic goals in the ME. It lies at the centre of key areas of interest including Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and its proxy networks impact French security goals. More broadly, the critical maritime chokepoints of the Bab-El-Mandeb strait and the Strait of Hormuz with incredible Iranian influence are also of trade and security importance. France was one of the first nations as part of the E3 to set to achieve a denuclearised Iran and this concern is ever-more relevant today with the dangerous

JCPOA stalemate and increasing conflagrations between Iran and USA backed Israel.⁴

Without a credible Western-led non-proliferation regime, European states risk facing a more nuclear-capable Iran — coupled with reduced leverage in negotiations. Bringing Iran to the table without US support to have incentives such as reduced sanctions for the nations gives the EU significantly less to work with in terms of leveraging Iran back to the negotiations table. However, what is important to note is that the USA critically failed to assess the correct carrot-and-stick approach with regards to Iran. Its threats of sanctions failed to cripple Iran’s economy in the long run and definitely did not target its top leaders and policy-makers.⁵ Its unilateral strikes on generals and nuclear bases only result in a further motivated Iran working to replace them and using its proxy actors such as the Houthis to undermine peace in the Middle East. This approach failed due to the same cause as many of US failures in the Middle East: a fundamental misunderstanding of Iranian strategic thinking and historical motivations for pursuing a nuclear programme. Understanding Iran’s fear and motivations are key to drafting a JCPOA that would sufficiently be able to contain this threat. This is where Europe is perfectly poised to stop following the foreign policy line of the US and bring its own plan to the table driven by its autonomous

¹ Middle East Institute (Brian Katulis), “US Policy in the Middle East: Third Quarter 2025 Report Card,” Middle East Institute, October 27, 2025

² Abdulaziz. “Geopolitics of China–Iran Cooperation.” In *China and Eurasian Connectivity*. Springer, 2023

³ SGDSN – Secrétariat général de la défense et de la sécurité nationale, “Revue nationale stratégique 2025,” SGDSN, July 13, 2025

⁴ *Diplomatie française (MEAE). France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy 2025*. Paris: Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères, 2025

⁵ Suzanne Maloney and Ray Takeyh, “The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions,” Brookings Institution, November 29, 2011

interests and foreign policy calculations. The past JCPOA additionally failed to include any Middle Eastern actors in the very issue that affects them the most as their concerns weren't even consulted in the negotiations. A renewed JCPOA led by France could both represent European interests and be inclusive of regional representation given France's long-standing alliances in the region.

2.2. *Israel-Palestine and Mediation Failure*

The Trump-era "Peace to Prosperity" plan and the enacted 20 point ceasefire has not only been ambiguous and contradictory in its writing but also deeply unilaterally driven prioritising US and its allies interests. It serves no attempt at holding Israeli breaches of international law accountable, leaves loopholes for Israel to breach its ceasefire as it already has, and does not contain an effective post-conflict plan for Palestine. Political analysts are widely skeptical of this attempt. Commentators at Brookings Institution observed that the plan marginalised Palestinian institutions, bypassed previously agreed frameworks, and favored one-sided territorial assumptions.⁶ Public policy experts at the Carnegie Endowment pointed out the fragility of implementation and the lack of sustainable local buy-in. These factors damage US credibility as a neutral and effective mediator.

This breakdown offers Europe a diplomatic opening further driven by existing deviations of European policy with regards to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Significant portions of the post-war rebuilding effort has fallen to the

⁶ Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "The 'Yes, But' Problem With the Gaza Peace Plan." Emissary, October 2025

EU's responsibility and it was one of the first times European leaders took an entirely different stance than the US by holding Israel to a higher standard and Macron notably recognising Palestine as a state.⁷ Instead of reacting to US initiatives, the EU — under France's leadership — could push for its own framework grounded in multilateral norms, backed by European resources, and more credible to local actors.

2.3. *Broader US Policy Failures: Security and Engagement*

Beyond nuclear diplomacy and the Israeli-Palestinian process, other elements of US strategy in the Middle East reflect inconsistency.⁸ In Yemen, the US has vacillated between pressure and limited engagement, leaving key actors — including the Houthis — in limbo. In Syria and Iraq, US troop postures and objectives have shifted significantly over time, undermining long-term predictability for regional partners. In Afghanistan, the sudden retrenchment allowed for the power vacuum to be filled by the very actors the US was initially at war with. Qatar faces regional attacks and takes the brunt of conflicts and US attempts at containing Hezbollah in Lebanon are overshadowed by Israeli skirmishes. In the Gulf, alliances are strong but American security guarantees remain transactional, with states increasingly hedging by diversifying their partners.

⁷ Amélie Féréy, "Reconnaissance de l'État palestinien : vrai changement ou pur symbole ?" IFRI, September 22, 2025

⁸ Fayet, Morgane. *US Policy in the Middle East: Strategic Outlook*. Paris: IFRI, 2023

3. Discussion of Findings

3.1. Stakeholder Analysis of External Powers: China and Russia

A crucial recent demonstration of the increasing threat of China was with the Security Belt March 2025 naval exercise between China, Russia, and Iran in March. In its fifth iteration in the Gulf of Oman, it presented an alarming show of force and the growing contest to European influence and ability to contain Iran. There are further deep military ties with joint operations, arms sales, technological cooperation expanding missiles and drones, etc. The second reason the Iranian threat has not been contained is the role of emerging players like China undercutting French and EU punishment efforts through its pragmatic strategy and increased influence in the region. This relationship between Iran and China has developed insofar as to the creation of the 20 year long Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) in 2021 and it has made extensive investments in Iranian railway, ports, energy, secretive defence ties, and infrastructure deals, etc through its BRI, becoming one of its largest trading partners. China also joins Russia to use diplomatic power to water down UN action on Iran, supporting its right to civilian nuclear development and opposing western sanctions.⁹

This is not limited to state activity, Chinese private enterprises also prop up the Iranian economy. There's a nexus of Chinese "teapot" refineries, including Shandong Luqing which was sanctioned by the US, that import

⁹ Reuters. "China, Iran, Russia Kick Off Talks in Beijing Over Iran's Nuclear Issues." Reuters, March 14, 2025

Iranian oil in Yuan in vast quantities avoiding US restrictions.¹⁰ This is an economic driven strategy for China as it is the world's largest importer of ME oil and is invested in diversifying its sources. The economic benefit from this sustains the IRGC regime despite sanctions and provides it with the economic backing to pursue its proxy militarisation.

This is a major concern for France as since the fall 2023 war, these proxies have coordinated attacks (rocket fire from Lebanon, drone strikes by Iraqis, Houthi missile salvos) partly enabled by China and Russia. This network complicates France's goals in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Red Sea. China is also extensively trying to institutionalise these trade links with new rail linkages to central Asia and the Gulf, reducing transit times and allowing for easier passage of dual use technologies without inspection. This is further exacerbated with the link to Russia and its Rosatom assistance to Iran's nuclear reactors such as Busherh, proxies such as Hezbollah being reported to use Russian designed weaponry, Russian renewed leases on naval bases, etc.¹¹ Trilateral exercises and joint militarisation creates difficulties in achieving the embargoes called for by France.

These purely economic endeavours pose a threat as they create alternative trade routes, remove the threat of economic isolation, reduce the brunt of sanctions, provide defence technology, prop up Iran's oil economy, and counter the possibility of military interventions to

¹⁰ Asia Focus 93, IRIS. China's Strategic Presence in the Middle East. Paris: IRIS, 2018

¹¹ INSS – Institute for National Security Studies. Iran–Russia Relations 2024. Tel Aviv: INSS, 2024

safeguard the straits. These threats are all major manoeuvres used to attempt to limit Iran and force it to the negotiation table, but now fall short of having coercive impact.

It is important to note that while China occasionally vies for a diplomatic role in shaping Middle Eastern conflicts, these efforts should not be mistaken for a true investment in shaping Middle Eastern Peace. China's role in the region is not one of diplomatic nature, that is merely superficial engagement or perhaps a farce for its economic and strategic interests — and it is imperative that France, and the EU recognise it as such.¹² It is a non-interventionist power globally beyond its own territorial concerns. However, its impact on safeguarding Iran from Western consequences is the critical concern.

When it comes to Russia, its global overcommitment — especially in Ukraine — limits how much bandwidth it has in the Middle East. While it remains a significant actor, it does not present itself as a potential guarantor of broad regional stability. Given Europe-Russia conflicts, using its absence to build the EU's sphere of influence in the region is critical and perfectly timed and its alliance and joint actions with China must be the focus.

France has a significantly higher stake in the Middle Eastern order and has specific goals it wishes to pursue in the region. It is not as ideologically driven as the US and

would not initiate democracy building interventions, but it's not as apathetic and purely realist incentives driven as China, positioning it as a middle actor that can truly be a force that brings equilibrium. As the USA withdraws and pursues transactional diplomacy/deals-based foreign policy in the ME, France may have to rethink its alignments in the region. It cannot pursue its Iranian goals singularly or only with the EU as long as China and by extension Russia provide alternatives and safeguard Iran from sanctions and international condemnation, and hence, France must answer the China question to be able to successfully engage with the Iranian threat.

From a European realist perspective, China's presence is double-edged: it brings infrastructure and economic integration, but not the deep, security-based guarantees Europe needs.¹³ Beijing's increasing interest in maneuvering diplomacy and negotiations cannot be overstated and taken as a credible middle actor. Moreover, economic entanglement with China may reduce Europe's maneuverability unless paired with strategic foresight. China's increasing economic influence in the Middle East through significant European trade and security interests must be noted. The EU does not need to follow suit in US trade wars with China, the nation is fundamentally not an enemy for the EU. There are shared strategic interests for both in the region that can be pursued jointly for better outcomes.

¹² Dannreuther, Roland. "China and the Middle East: Towards a More Systematic Engagement?" *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (2010)

¹³ Brookings Institution (Sun, Yun). *Forecasting China's Strategy in the Middle East over the Next Four Years*. Washington: Brookings, 2024

Iran remains central to Middle Eastern geopolitics. Its nuclear program, enriched since the JCPOA exit, is increasingly linked to broader strategic ambitions. Tehran also deepens its relationships with regional states (e.g., via economic deals) and non-state actors. Its alliances — whether with Russia, certain Gulf states, or in proxy theaters — contribute to a more multipolar environment. Europe must take into account this complex reality: Iran is not isolated, and any European strategy must address its nuclear, economic, and regional dimensions.

3.2. Stakeholder Analysis of External Powers: Middle Eastern Regional Players

It is also important to have a regional calculus of US alliances in the Middle East vis-a-vis China and Russia, along with the strategic priorities of key actors in the region.¹⁴ Gulf states — notably the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar — are reevaluating their external dependencies. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have grown comfortable diversifying their partnerships: balancing ties with the US, deepening economic links with China, and engaging regionally. Their strategic priorities include maritime security (Red Sea), energy investments, and hedging against Iran. This realignment gives Europe an opening: by offering a credible multilateral partnership, France-led Europe could become a meaningful interlocutor for Gulf states seeking stability without over-reliance on Washington.

Conflict in Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria underscores the influence of non-state actors — including

¹⁴ Tandfonline. “Middle East Security Order and External Powers.” *Mediterranean Politics* (2009)

militias, proxy networks, and political groups. These actors pose threats to security and trade ambitions. Europe must design policies that integrate not only state actors but also local power dynamics, offering both hard and soft engagement paths. A France-led EU strategy must be flexible and locally informed, balancing engagement with states and sub-state actors to navigate fragmentation effectively.

3.3. Stakeholder Analysis of External Powers: Europe’s Strategic Stakes – Why France-Led Engagement Is Necessary

Europe’s proximity to the Middle East makes it directly vulnerable to regional instability. Migration flows — driven by war, economic breakdown, or climate stress — remain a core political challenge. Energy dependencies on Middle Eastern states leave Europe exposed to supply shocks and geopolitical risk. Furthermore, the persistence of conflict and non-state militias increases the risk of radicalisation and terrorism with direct implications for European security. For Europe, then, Middle Eastern instability is not abstract — it’s a material challenge that demands a proactive, strategic footprint.

Iran is a historically critical vector for France as it was one of the first associates to its nascent nuclear programme, there are long-standing business and cultural ties, and continuous diplomatic engagement from the Pahlavi to the Post-revolution eras.¹⁵ This relationship as well as its P5 nuclear power status, military presence in Djibouti and the

¹⁵ Clément Therme, “French Nuclear Policy Towards Iran: From the Shah to the Islamic Republic,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 34, no. 1 (2023): 117–139

UAE, extensive experience with navigating Middle East conflict negotiations such as with the E3 sets up France to lead the EU in comprehensively addressing the Iranian threat.¹⁶ France rightfully recognises the role of the Middle East as a power generator, and this conflict serves as an avenue to realise its unique ability to use its history and position to shape European regional security interests.

European strategic autonomy depends in part on reducing overreliance on the United States. Unpredictable US engagement undermines long-term planning and weakens Europe's bargaining power. By leading a more coherent Middle East strategy, Europe can bolster its geopolitical agency, safeguard its interests, and avoid being sidelined by external powers. In the gap left by USA's retrenchment, France is especially well placed to lead. It maintains diplomatic ties throughout the region, deploys military capabilities, and has experience in nuclear diplomacy. Crucially, France is viewed as a partner that respects regional agency: Paris supports regionally-led decision-making, enabling local actors to shape their future, even as it offers external facilitation when needed.

4. Policy Recommendations: A Realist, France-Led European Strategy

To strengthen its strategic autonomy and influence in the Middle East, the EU must adopt a proactive, coordinated approach. The following policy proposals outline realistic, interest-driven measures to manage

regional conflicts and safeguard European security and economic interests.¹⁷

Firstly, France should spearhead the re-launch of the JCPOA starting with the European E3 (France-Germany-UK) and involving China, Russia and regional actors. France should re-engage Iran through a track independent of constant US volatility, aiming for phased enrichment limits and sanctions relief anchored in verifiable mechanisms. Secondly, France should anchor a naval security platform able to respond to threats securing EU trade lines through the Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, etc. Threats to these maritime chokepoints are a significant vulnerability to EU supply chains. Increase its maritime presence through both drones and naval vessels to ensure free Sea Lines of Communication through its bases in Djibouti and the UAE or the Corymbe and EU-Atlanta operations to safeguard critical chokepoints from Houthi interceptions (as it has in the past) and Chinese-Russian exercises. With regards to Israel-Palestine, France should initiate a European framework for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations backed by the two-state agenda and stringent conditions placed by international law and EU monitoring of Israeli breaches, avoiding reliance on unilateral US plans. This must provide long-term financial and technical support to strengthen Palestinian institutional capacity, tied to realistic reform and European oversight: shared infrastructure, economic

¹⁶ Pirooz Izadi, "Iran and France: Shattered Dreams," Middle East Institute, January 29, 2009

¹⁷ ECFR – European Council on Foreign Relations. Alone in the Desert: How France Can Lead Europe in the Middle East. Paris/Brussels: ECFR, 2024

partnerships, and joint security mechanisms to rebuild trust.

The fourth most extensive policy recommendation is of France's recalibration of its relationship with China specifically in its function in the Middle East is of utmost importance to achieving its goals in Iran. France's relationship to China is far more nuanced than the American one. It maintains a strategically autonomous position on ties with China and does not need to engage in unnecessary enmity. As France moves away from falling under the US foreign policy umbrella, it can craft its own autonomous Iran posture for its strategic goals. There is a dual policy with regards to China of partnership on trade, climate, international institutions governance etc as well as a parallel competition in matters of geopolitics and technological advancements. Hence, there must be a multi-pronged strategy addressing the Iran threat as it relates to China:

Co-operation on shared goals: China has a multialigned trade oriented policy in the Middle East and hence, a nuclear Iran is a threat to regional stability and their other ME alliances. A disruption of oil supply or free trade routes in the 2 key straits due to regional conflict would significantly impact China's energy security. Furthermore, conflict ridden states negatively impact China's BRI expansion aspirations and threaten existing trade routes. As is seen with their actions WRT attacks on their investments in Pakistan, economic security is first priority even with its strongest allies. Without US involvement, China is much more likely to agree to such deliberations. This overall

preference towards a stable ME can lead to collaboration with France on several aspects.

Iran Non-Proliferation: A France led effort to bring back an Iran nuclear deal could benefit by being supported by China. New meetings could take place in an E3 + China format, with all nations having significant negotiating power and incentives they can provide Iran. China generally accepts the role of the IAEA. The deliberations with Iran can include a commitment to returning to the IAEA roadmap as per UNSC resolution 2231's mandates for nuclear enrichment

Limiting proxy support: China would prefer Iran limiting its military exports to its proxy NSAs as they endanger Chinese investments in Iraq/Lebanon and the Houthis threaten its trade in the Red Sea. France and China can agree on mandating Iran to reduce its militarisation of its proxy networks.

Removal of sanctions: In exchange, the snapback mechanism's EU sanctions on Iran can be removed, oil trade with the EU and China can be permitted, and limited military defensive support through regional allies can be provided to address Iran's security threats. Similarly to how China pursued the Saudi-Iran normalisation, such efforts with other allies such as the UAE can be pursued by both nations. These incentives must be scaled up incrementally as Iran shows consistent commitment.

Dual-use containment: France cannot blindly trust China in this alliance either. There are still major concerns of exports of dual use technology, militarisation drills,

shielding Iran diplomatically, etc. The cost of non-compliance for China in this deal is fairly low but increasing support for its economic priorities of energy security as a shared concern for both nations may provide enough incentive.

However, France must parallelly also increase EU monitoring to have enough surveillance data on Iranian-Chinese illicit oil and munitions trade and be able to crack down on the “teapot” companies; strengthen its Gulf partnerships including UAE, Saudi Arabia, and even Israel that rival China to ensure a strong allied group in the region that strengthens tanker tracking and port-inspection regimes; and counterweigh Chinese BRI power projection through increased support for the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor and further strengthening alliances with India as it also seeks to contain Chinese expansion through its own naval operations and port constructions in the Middle East.

Throughout France’s renewed Iran-China posture, it must prioritise remaining autonomous and sharing goals but not blindly following US or China foreign policy rhetoric. This calibrated approach echoes Macron’s “de-risking” doctrine – press China where our interests diverge (sanction evasion, arms flows) but keep dialogue open on shared challenges. Overall, the Iran-China increasing alliance poses a threat to French ambitions on containing Iran, and it must walk the thin line and pursue a nuanced foreign policy balancing its strategic goals.

5. Conclusion

The Middle East is undergoing a structural realignment. US retrenchment, limited but growing influence from China and Russia, and shifting regional dynamics demand that Europe rethink its role. Europe cannot afford to remain passive: its interests — in migration, energy, and security — are directly tied to stability in the region. A France-led European strategy offers the most viable pathway. France combines legitimacy through its respect for regional agency with the capacity to act as an external facilitator. By renewing nuclear diplomacy, establishing a security architecture, promoting regional-led processes, engaging in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, and conditionally aligning with China, Europe can build a durable, interest-driven strategy ultimately serving its goal to further strategic autonomy and fulfill the vacuum left in the Middle East— a role that is historically served as a power generator.

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