

# French status seeking in a changing world: taking on the role as the guardian of the liberal order

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**Abstract** France has a long history as a traditional European great power. But is this still the case today? The analysis in this article shows how French exceptionalism, often referred to as ‘grandeur’ is still the guiding principle of French foreign policy, but that it is being practised differently today. President Macron may be right in arguing that ‘France is back’, but it is important to note that modern French power projection or status seeking takes place through a set of very different mechanisms. The key argument put forward in this article is that French status is increasingly based on a type of symbolic power, and to understand the mechanisms through which this power is managed, insights from social psychology and Social Identification Theory (SIT) are helpful. SIT points to three different strategies for maintaining a position within a social hierarchy that may also be valid for international politics: social mobility, social competition and social creativity. While France has adopted different types of strategies in earlier periods (social mobility in the immediate post-war years and social competition during the Cold War), the analysis in this article shows that French foreign policy practices are now increasingly being legitimised through the creation of a new narrative. Interestingly, this narrative consists of the current French political leadership’s eagerness to take on the role as ‘the guardian of the liberal order’, which fits nicely with what SIT identify as a strategy of social creativity.

**Keywords** France · Foreign policy · Status · Influence · Symbolic power

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## Introduction

While several authors from the late 1990s onwards have focused on the decline of French power (e.g. Boniface 1998; Bavarez 2003; Drake 2011; Fenby 2014), ‘exceptionalism’ or ‘grandeur’ is still commonly cited in explaining the foundations of French foreign policy (Gordon 1993; Meunier 2000; Godin and Chafer 2005; Holsti 2010; Krotz 2015). The aim of this article is to take a closer look at French exceptionalism and what it entails today. Is it still rooted in France’s glorious past and the ideas of the Revolution, or has it been given a new *raison d’être*?

Many have argued that a great power needs economic, military and political strength: indeed, according to E. H. Carr (1939: 108), these forms of power are in practice inseparable. Similarly, Paul Kennedy (1989: xvi) has pointed out that with all great powers there has been a long-term correlation between a strong economy and military strength. However, the test of a great power is not purely ‘the test of war’, as A. J. P. Taylor (1954) put it. Increasingly important is how states act, interact, utilize or modify and adapt their behaviour within, and to, specific international institutional contexts and settings. How states act towards each other will also vary, depending on how institutionalized the components of the international system are (Keohane 1989). From such a perspective, a state’s ability to influence, shape and utilize multilateral frameworks for its own interests, norms and values might be taken as one criterion for understanding the practices of contemporary great powers.

A state’s ability to have influence is not necessarily based solely on hard power (economic and military power): there is also soft power or the power of attraction. Soft power became a buzzword in international relations after the end of the Cold War (Nye 1990), but the concept also has its equivalent in French philosophy and sociology from the 1960s. There is much in common between soft power and *symbolic power*, a concept introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. According to Bourdieu, symbolic power accounts for the tacit, almost unconscious, modes of cultural/social dominance that occur within modern societies. Further, symbolic power can account for disciplining that actors can use against others, to confirm their own placement in the social hierarchy, also upheld through system institutions (Bourdieu 1979). Bourdieu indicated that cultural roles are more dominant than economic forces in determining how hierarchies of power are situated and reproduced across societies. In his view, both status—understood as the position held in the social hierarchy—and economic capital are necessary for maintaining dominance in a system. While Bourdieu primarily studied the interaction between people and social groups at a national level, some of the mechanisms are readily transferrable to international society and can help to explain state behaviour. With France, this may be particularly applicable, with cultural capital being presented as the very foundation of French exceptionalism (*grandeur*). In essence, this relies on the conviction that the ideas of the French Revolution still provide the normative foundations of modern Western democracies as such.

This article surveys how and to what extent the foundations of French exceptionalism have and still influence French foreign policy, and how they have been



adjusted to various changes in the international context. It draws on the concept of *symbolic power* and *status*, identifying certain *status indicators* relevant for French foreign policy, all of which can be described as different forms of cultural or social capital. As *cultural capital* refers to non-financial social assets that may give status independent of economic means (material capital) (Bourdieu 1986), the relative power or status associated with this form of capital depends on how it is managed. Here, insights from Social Identification Theory (SIT) may prove useful. According to Larson and Shevchenko (2003), actors form part of their image of who they are from their social group as an aspect of self; they derive self-esteem and—thereby their identity—from the achievements of their group and its status relative to others. Therefore, actors will want their group to stand out. Members of a lower-status group may improve their position by applying various strategies, such as joining a higher-status group (*social mobility*); mobilizing resources to improve the group's relative standing (*social competition*); or re-evaluating the meaning of the group's negative features and/or finding new dimensions on which the group is superior (*social creativity*) (Larson and Shevchenko 2003: 79). While this theory was developed for understanding human behaviour, I will, in this article, show how the mechanisms are applicable to nation-states with a strong sense of state identity, like France.

While the focus of this article is on the post-Cold War period in general and in particular the period since the turn of the millennium, we will start exploring the character of French status seeking during the Cold War in order to be able to identify change.

## French traditional status seeking being challenged

References to historical exceptionalism are often nourished by a period of decline. After centuries of having a dominant role in Europe, France began to enter into decline at the end of the First World War. Although it was amongst the victorious parties, the country had suffered massive wartime losses. When the Second World War began, France had not yet recovered: it collapsed at an early stage and under humiliating circumstances. In 1940, the northern and western parts of France were invaded and occupied by Nazi Germany; the Third Republic was replaced by the 'French State' (*État français*), with its sovereignty and authority limited to the remaining free zones. As Paris was located in the occupied zone, the French government was seated in Vichy. The Vichy regime under the leadership of Maréchal Pétain collaborated with the Germans, while the resistance, led by General Charles de Gaulle, was installed in London and represented 'France libre'. France was in such a weak position at the end of the war that it did not participate in the peace conferences in Teheran (1943), Yalta or Potsdam (1945) where Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin discussed the end of the war and the post-war arrangements. This was indeed humiliating for a former great power and can explain why French foreign policy ever since has been dominated by the ambition to restore the country's lost status. In the post-war years, this approach was also explicitly justified by referring to France's



historical heritage, its ‘exceptionalism’ or, as de Gaulle put it, ‘*la grandeur de la France*’.<sup>1</sup>

During his time as head of state, de Gaulle also succeeded in restoring some of France’s greatness. Indeed, under his leadership, and despite its weakness at the time, France managed to become one of the five permanent (veto-power) members of the UN Security Council. While this was due mainly to de Gaulle’s desire to restore the international role of his country, it was also supported by Churchill, who feared that the UK might find itself isolated between the two new superpowers. Thus, we see that the other post-war powers recognized the legitimacy of a role for France in the world, despite its weakness at the time. This gap between actual power and recognition indicates that the concept of *status*, and not *power*, might be more suitable for describing the position of France at the end of the Second World War. While power is often linked to certain resources and capabilities, status is more a ‘collective belief about a given state’s ranking on valued attributes’ (Paul et al. 2014: 7). The fact that the other post-war powers accepted France and treated it as a great power despite its weakness shows that ‘status’ is both subjective and socially constructed with historical references (ibid: 9).

Reference to the historical status of the country was used as a way of legitimating the policies of de Gaulle, who, after an unstable period with shifting governments, managed to build a new and strong republic (the Fifth Republic, established in 1958), with a firm presidential system, a centralized and highly competitive educational system, and an ambitious foreign policy agenda. For de Gaulle, it was precisely the added value of French culture and history for the European continent that legitimized the ambitions of restoring the country’s status and greatness in the post-war period:

All my life, I have had a certain idea of France. [...] France is really only herself in the first rank; That only the vast enterprises are capable of compensating for the ferments of dispersion that its people bear within themselves; That our country, as it is, among the others, as they are, must, under threat of mortal danger, aim high and stand upright. In short, in my opinion, France cannot be France without grandeur (de Gaulle 1954, my translation).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The French are often perceived as taking a great pride in national identity and the positive achievements of France. For instance, the French Revolution claimed universalism for the democratic principles of the Republic. In the post war period, Charles de Gaulle actively promoted a notion of French “grandeur” (“greatness”), which has come to be a defining aspect of French foreign policy.

<sup>2</sup> Toute ma vie, je me suis fait une certaine idée de la France. Le sentiment me l’inspire aussi bien que la raison. Ce qu’il y a en moi d’affectif imagine naturellement la France, telle la princesse des contes ou la madone aux fresques des murs, comme vouée à une destinée éminente et exceptionnelle. J’ai, d’instinct, l’impression que la Providence l’a créée pour des succès achevés ou des malheurs exemplaires. S’il advient que la médiocrité marque, pourtant, ses faits et gestes, j’en éprouve la sensation d’une absurde anomalie, imputable aux fautes des Français, non au génie de la patrie. Mais aussi, le côté positif de mon esprit me convainc que la France n’est réellement elle-même qu’au premier rang; que, seules, de vastes entreprises sont susceptibles de compenser les ferments de dispersion que son peuple porte en lui-même; que notre pays, tel qu’il est, parmi les autres, tels qu’ils sont, doit, sous peine de danger mortel, viser haut et se tenir droit. Bref, à mon sens, la France ne peut être la France sans la grandeur.



In terms of Social Identification Theory, one could characterize this period in French history as a one of social mobility as de Gaulle succeeded in convincing the other great powers at the time that France had a role to play in the UN Security Council in spite of its weakness. The Cold War period, on the other hand, is a period that is better described as a period of social competition as it is characterized by the focus on independence and national strength with a focus on military build-up nationally and taking the lead in the European integration process.

It is not difficult to see that status seeking was central to French foreign policy in the immediate post-war years and during the Cold War and that it was a rather successful strategy. But what is left of this ambition today? According to Charillon (2010), a leading French expert on French foreign policy, France still matters on the international scene, but the interesting question is *through which mechanisms* it has managed to uphold or regain its influence. In the remaining part of the article, we will try to identify these mechanisms by identifying and systematically analyzing a set of core dimensions (or ‘status indicators’) of the Fifth Republic and investigate their continued importance today.

French power politics or status seeking in the Fifth Republic seems to have been built around the following four key elements or status indicators that, interestingly enough, also make it easier also to promote French symbolic power or cultural capital: (1) historical legitimacy for its global role; (2) powerful national institutions and an expert corps of higher civil servants; (3) representation at the core of key global and regional institutions; and (4) having strong instruments for power projection that cover both hard and soft power. As we shall see, these indicators have also been increasingly challenged—some more than others—in recent decades, due to various internal and external developments and changes. But by investigating them in the light of symbolic power and Social Identification Theory, we will try to shed new light on modern French foreign policy and status seeking.

In the post-Cold War era, French status has been challenged both internally and externally. First, globalization and the need for economic modernization have encountered heavy resistance in France. Fears of French culture becoming ‘Americanized’ have figured in the national debate, leading to claims to cultural exceptionalism—promoted in particular by Jack Lang, former French Minister of Culture, in the 1990s. Later, in reaction to the war in Iraq, stronger European unification was seen as a solution and a way of counter-balancing US foreign policy. This idea was also presented by Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida in 2003 (later published as Habermas and Derrida 2005). Second, there is increased anxiety about the consequences of a growing Muslim presence and multiculturalism, to some extent seen as a threat to the basic concept of French secularism, *la laïcité*, and the nation as one and indivisible. There has also been widespread disillusion with the major political parties, which are perceived as ineffective and corrupt. Third, France has experienced a loss in relative influence within the Union as the EU enlargement process has given the smaller members states a greater say, and the financial crisis has given Germany a more prominent role, creating an imbalance in the previously finely tuned French–German relationship (Lequesne 2008). Last but not least, the role of France (and of the West as such) is challenged at the global level by the emergent non-Western powers.



## Towards a new form of status seeking: adapting the status indicators to a new context

Let us return to the four status indicators of the Fifth Republic, asking to what extent these have been adjusted in response to internal and external challenges mentioned above over the past 20 years.

### Historical Legitimacy and the need to uphold an ambitious foreign policy

The desire to retain or restore *status* remains at the core of French foreign policy, which is still based on a certain universalism. However, the content has been changed and adapted to the realities of France's resources and capabilities (Charillon 2011: 14). In the White Paper on French foreign policy developed under the Sarkozy presidency (Ministère des Affaires étrangères 2008–2020), only one of the five main priorities indicates that exceptionalism is still alive: the ambition *to ensure the presence of French ideas, the French language and French culture*. Although it is emphasized that this should be done in ways that do not undermine cultural diversity, this shows that the perception of a certain French exceptionalism still exists. The other priorities set out in the White Paper are not necessarily expressions of exceptionalism, but are in fact quite similar to the priorities of most European countries, big or small: to ensure the security of the country and its people, defend its interests, construct a strong, efficient and democratic Europe, promote peace, security and human rights in the world and contribute to sustainable development. However, in a foreign policy declaration in August 2015, President Hollande referred to the 'great idea of France for the world' and also included references to French greatness:

It's because we uphold these values that the terrorists want to strike us, but it's because we're guardians of this great idea of progress, or I could say this great idea of France for the world, that many countries signal their solidarity with us and many peoples express their gratitude to us (Hollande 2015).

Thus, references to '*la grandeur de la France*' can be seen as a way of legitimizing an ambitious foreign policy agenda. Laurent Fabius, former Minister of Foreign Affairs (and one-time Prime Minister), alluded to this by emphasizing how independence in foreign policy is 'the trademark of our foreign policy and the key to our international influence' (quoted in de Galbert 2015). This need for independent action is also linked to the perception that France has a special responsibility, based on its cultural capital, for conducting global diplomacy. As Hollande argued, it is essential to 'take action for ourselves, for our interests, for the security of the French people, as well as for our ideals and the preservation of the planet' (Hollande 2015).

With Macron as the new president in France, this approach seems to have even further intensified. In his address to both chambers of Parliament at the Palace of



Versailles,<sup>3</sup> he referred to ‘*la grandeur de la France*’ several times. For instance, he stated that:

Political action has meaning only if it is accomplished in the name of a certain idea of man, of his destiny, of his unsurpassable value and of his greatness. This idea, France has long held. Nothing else must count in our eyes (Macron 2017a; My translation).<sup>4</sup>

And in his address to the ambassadors convened in Paris in August 2017, he put emphasis on the role that France needs to play for universal values:

I am making security and independence a focus of our foreign policy, but the goal is not to make France a small, overcautious country that jealously guards its peace; on the contrary, the goal is to use these principles and key arguments to serve what is greater than us, to make them the foundations for increased influence, anchored in our values and our ideals; all this to give voice, once again, to this universalism which embodies us so profoundly. [...] I call these ideals our common goods. France must tirelessly advocate them, because they are central to its vocation, and because this is how France stands in solidarity with the world (Macron 2017b).<sup>5</sup>

### Strong national institutions

French ambitions of playing a global role are not based solely on past glory: they have also been facilitated by the establishment of a strong executive and a competent diplomatic staff. Some of these status indicators have also, as we shall see, been further strengthened recently.

#### *A strong executive with decision-making capacity*

The Fifth Republic was established in 1958 when the French nation-state was in crisis due to the traumatism of Nazi occupation, wartime French collaboration, the liberation war in Algeria as well the political instability of the Fourth Republic (Marcussen et al. 1999). In this critical period, President Charles de Gaulle managed to reconstruct the identity of the French nation-state, reuniting a deeply divided nation around a shared vision of France’s role in the world.

<sup>3</sup> While Macron is not the first French leader to address both houses of parliament, such addresses are rare and typically reserved for times of crisis. It was only in 2008 that Sarkozy made the constitutional reform to allow presidents to address parliament in person. Prior to that, they could only address both houses through written speeches that were read aloud by the prime minister. Since then, there have only been two such addresses at Versailles: the first was given by when Sarkozy announced his plans to ban the burka in 2009 and the second by Hollande in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks. Macron, however, has pledged that the address would become an annual tradition of his presidency.

<sup>4</sup> L’action politique n’a de sens que si elle est accomplie au nom d’une certaine idée de l’homme, de son destin, de sa valeur indépassable et de sa grandeur. Cette idée, la France la porte depuis longtemps. Rien d’autre ne doit compter à nos yeux (Macron 2017a).

<sup>5</sup> <https://za.ambafrance.org/Speech-by-President-Emmanuel-Macron-Ambassadors-Week-2017>.



One feature of the Fifth Republic, as opposed to the Fourth, was the strong executive—a president elected for 7-year term (reduced to 5 years in 2002) with extensive powers.<sup>6</sup> This power is linked to the fact that the president is the head of the armed forces, has control of France’s nuclear deterrent and negotiates with foreign powers and ratifies treaties. Moreover, the president is empowered to call referendums on laws or on constitutional changes, dissolve the parliament, and nominate the prime minister as well as ministers and senior figures in the administration. The French president appoints three of the nine members of the Constitutional Council, including its president, which he can call upon to decide on the constitutionality of a law. The only time the French president has real accountability is when he goes to the people to seek to renew his mandate.

The fact that the French presidential system provides the head of state with such extensive powers is an asset when it comes to decision-making capacity and thus the ability to fulfil the ambition of influence in international politics. Nor are there any signs that this is changing: in fact, this role is to be further strengthened. Following the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris, a constitutional change was proposed to make it easier to declare a state of emergency.

### *Highly qualified and homogeneous diplomatic leadership*

While all countries build their foreign policy around some kind of national identity, there seems to be an especially strong consensus in France about the importance of maintaining the role of France in the world. This might be a direct result of the way higher civil servants are recruited and trained (Lequesne 2017). The ‘*grandes écoles*’ from which the majority of this group come—as do the politicians and the heads of major French companies—seem to provide the elites with a certain ‘*esprit de la République*’. The emphasis is on excellence, but also on a certain narrative of French history, politics and interests, which in the end reproduces and fortifies the concept of French exceptionalism and its universal mission. In addition, the training itself produces special skills for conducting clear and convincing argumentation, making a synthesis of complex issues, as well as focusing on rhetorical and public speaking skills. All this makes for the specific quality of the French diplomatic corps, with a negotiation style that is both admired and provocative (Cogan 2003).

A study of how the various delegations in the UN Security Council (UNSC) work found the French delegation to be amongst the most influential delegations (Schia Nagelhus 2013: 143). This is partly linked to the fact that France has highly competent and homogeneous staff that have received similar training, but also due to the fact that the French system provides more autonomy to ambassadors or heads of

<sup>6</sup> The president was initially chosen by an electoral college but, after a 1962 referendum, this was changed to direct election.





delegations than the case with other countries.<sup>7</sup> This could be advantageous in certain situations or difficult negotiations (Kessler 2012: 224).

### Formal position and influence in key international institutions

References to a certain historical legitimacy, decision-making capacities at the executive level, and a certain level of expertise amongst higher civil servants are crucial factors for understanding how France has managed to maintain its status in international politics. In addition, by holding positions in key international institutions, France is also able to retain influence in difficult periods and show that it is in the possession of considerable symbolic power and cultural capital. Let us see how France has positioned itself in these institutions, and how and to what extent it has chosen to adapt to changing realities.

#### *The UN: permanent seat in the UNSC and the French global mission*

French influence at the global level derives first and foremost from its position as a permanent member of the Security Council. As noted, this came about after the Second World War as a result of a collective belief in France's status rather than its actual power at the time. The prestige of membership in the 'P-5' is linked to the veto powers of the members. Interestingly, however, this veto power has not been employed very often, and its use has declined since the end of the Cold War. Instead, the number of resolutions, often unanimous ones, has grown exponentially over the same period, indicating a development towards a more cooperative working environment in the Security Council. Quantitative analysis of the French role in the UNSC shows that France has used its veto power quite sparingly, vetoing 18 resolutions from 1949 to 2014—compared with 90 vetoes by the Soviet Union/Russia, 77 by the USA, 32 by the UK and 10 by China (McClellan 2014). The most visible French veto in recent time concerned French opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003. While successive crises in international politics have confirmed the importance of the UN, they have also made clear the need for making the organization more effective and more representative of current global power structures. This is something that most of the P-5 agree on, but the challenge has been to find a way to do this without requiring any of them to give up their seats. President Hollande put forward a rather

<sup>7</sup> France has kept a range of diplomats called envoys or *plenipotentiary ministers*. In France, such high-level diplomats are usually referred to as 'ministers'; while they are not considered as representatives of the head of state, they have plenipotentiary powers, i.e. full authority to represent the government. Until the mid-twentieth century, most diplomats in the world had the rank of minister (or envoy), with *ambassadors* being exchanged only among major nations, or close allies and related monarchies. After the Second World War, however, it was no longer deemed acceptable to treat some nations as inferior to others, given the UN doctrine of the equality of sovereign states, and the rank of envoy for the highest-ranking officials of diplomatic missions gradually disappeared. In addition, nowadays heads of state and of government, as well as more junior ministers and officials, can easily meet or speak with each other personally. With the need for a special category of 'envoy' becoming less obvious, most countries decided to drop the title.



radical reform proposal in 2013 involving expansion of the Security Council, by supporting permanent seats for Germany, Brazil, India, Japan and an Arab country, as well as greater presence of African countries. In addition, following the deadlock over Syria—and drawing on the Responsibility to Protect—France proposed a ‘code of conduct’ for the P-5. To avoid paralysis in the UNSC, Hollande proposed in 2013 that the permanent members should voluntarily and collectively pledge not to use their veto<sup>8</sup> in cases of mass atrocities such as genocide, crimes against humanity, or large-scale war crimes. As of 21 October 2015, the French initiative had the support of 80 countries.<sup>9</sup>

The role as a host to the COP21 conference on climate change in Paris in December 2015 is also worth mentioning. After a series of disappointing meetings, this summit resulted in an important international agreement to lower carbon emissions in the coming decades. In the aftermath, the skills of French civil servants and the French diplomatic corps were widely praised.<sup>10</sup> These initiatives and efforts must be viewed in connection with a conviction that France has a special responsibility to promote common and global objectives. After the election of Trump in the USA and his threats of withdrawing from this and other international agreements, President Macron’s commitment to trying to convince him to stay in the agreements is interesting in this perspective.

### *The EU: towards a revised strategy for Europeanization?*

While the country’s political leaders appear convinced that France has some kind of global mission, they also seem to agree that this is best achieved by developing a strong, independent and united Europe. Back in the 1950s, the initiative to start a European integration process was intended as a solution to a longstanding problem: that of stabilizing relations between France and Germany. The Europe Declaration, written by the French diplomat Jean Monnet and endorsed by French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman on 9 May 1950, took France into an unprecedented experiment: the voluntary sharing of decision-making power in the key economic sectors of coal and steel, under the authority of new, European-level institutions. While this might be seen as counter to France’s status seeking at the time, it was perceived by the French leadership as an instrument for strengthening the country’s international influence, albeit in partnership with Germany and the other founding members.

The new European institutions provided the framework for a constructive partnership, and, by the 1960s, the Franco–German relationship had become the backbone of the European Economic Communities. The ‘special relationship’ was formalized with the Elysée Treaty of 1963 (Drake 2011). From a strategic perspective,

<sup>8</sup> At the United Nations Security Council, decisions are adopted with a majority of 9 votes out of the 15 votes of the Council’s members. Any decision is rejected if one of the five Security Council permanent members uses its veto power.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.franceonu.org/France-and-UN-Reform>.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/13/paris-climate-deal-cop-diplomacy-developing-united-nations>.



the relationship with Germany was intended to enable France to exert influence in the form of leadership on the European continent—in turn, enabling Europe to exert influence as an autonomous bloc, known in French as *Europe puissance*. Had the UK been willing to join de Gaulle in this venture on French terms, then France would most probably have sought a trilateral relationship at the core of the integration process. However, Britain's exclusive commitment to the USA was seen as a potential 'Trojan Horse' for USA influence within the EC, which explains why de Gaulle twice rejected the UK's bid to join the EEC before it was finally accepted. All French governments since the early 1950s have held that a French-dominated European integration process would boost not only European but also French influence internationally (Maclean and Szarka 2008).

While this Europeanization strategy remained the dominant feature of the French approach to the EC/EEC throughout the Cold War period, this idea has been increasingly challenged since then. With the reunification of Germany and the enlargement process, the EU has changed radically, and the relative influence of France within it has diminished. Thus, the European integration process has lost the prominent position it occupied during the Cold War and the narrative of *Europe puissance* has gradually eroded (Rozenberg 2011: 26). Over time, there has also been a growing Euroscepticism in France. The first evidence came with ratification of the Maastricht Treaty and '*le petit oui*' (51.04%) in 1992 and in 2004, when ratification of the Constitutional Treaty was rejected by 54%. Moreover, the political leadership is increasingly questioning the French role within the European Union. While observers and analysts have noted the lessening of French influence for some time, this has now been clearly stated in a public report presented by the Commission for European Affairs in the French National Assembly on French influence in the European Union (Assemblée Nationale 2015). While it is stated clearly in the synthesis of the report that the reduced influence is a consequence of enlargement, there is also considerable self-criticism in the report, emphasizing that it is also a result of difficulties in the French economy:

The influence of France in the European Union is now weakened. The weakening of French influence is due in part to successive waves of enlargement in the East since 2004. [...]. But it was mainly the poor economic and budgetary performance of France that led to its weakening on the scene (Assemblée Nationale 2015: 7)<sup>11</sup>

To remedy this, the report argues that France will need to understand better the functioning of Europe, adopt 'European reflexes', build coalitions and avoid arrogance:

<sup>11</sup> l'influence de la France dans l'Union européenne est aujourd'hui affaiblie. L'affaiblissement de l'influence française résulte en partie des vagues d'élargissement successifs à l'Est depuis 2004. [...]. Mais ce sont surtout les mauvaises performances économiques et budgétaires de la France qui ont conduit à son affaiblissement sur la scène.



To be influential in Europe, France needs to better understand how it works, and adopt “European reflexes”: anticipate, share information, make coalitions, avoid arrogance (Assemblée Nationale 2015: 8, my translation).<sup>12</sup>

Still, President Hollande continued to promote European integration in his foreign policy declarations. He and most of the French establishment continued to genuinely believe that moving the European enterprise backwards would risk fragmentation or greater unravelling (Hollande 2015), thereby reinforcing a French decline as well. The main issue was no longer whether France was declining, but whether Europe as such is declining. According to Charillon (2010: 185), the two destinies are so closely linked that the one cannot ‘survive’ without the other.

Some have questioned the lack of French leadership in handling the various challenges that Europe was facing under Hollande’s presidency. However, France’s role in the area of security and defence enabled France somehow to compensate for this. France has continued to be at the forefront of promoting the development of an effective Common European Security Defence and Policy (CSDP). While the achievements of the CSDP have been far below French ambitions, the failure to establish this *Europe de la défense* may also explain the adaptation of the French ambitions towards a more flexible approach, with France opting for more unilateral action often on behalf of Europe. This means that French military operations are legitimized as being conducted in defence of common European interests and values. This was the case in Libya, as well as in CAR, Mali and more recently in Syria as well (see Rieker 2017: Chapter 3 and 4). Again, this approach must be interpreted as a strategy for keeping France at the core of an enlarged and—for a period—German-dominated Union. Until recently, the main strategy for France was therefore to focus on its military strength and claim to be acting on behalf of the EU, as was the case in both Mali and Syria. The fact that the French government decided to draw on Article 42.7 of the EU Treaty—the ‘mutual defence clause’—after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015 can be seen as an indication of France’s continued European commitment.<sup>13</sup>

With the election of Macron, France has returned to the core of the EU with a clear and explicit willingness to take the lead in reforming and strengthening the EU in all areas, including defence. In his famous Sorbonne speech in September 2017:

The time when France “sought” to take decisions for Europe may have existed; but that is not what I want to do. But the time when France makes proposals in order to move forward with Europe and every European who so wishes – that time has returned, and I’m thinking right now of Robert Schuman who, in Paris on 9 May 1950, was bold enough to propose building Europe. I remember his powerful words: ‘A united Europe was not achieved and we had war.’” (Macron 2017c)

<sup>12</sup> Pour être influente en Europe, la France doit mieux comprendre le fonctionnement de celle-ci, et adopter des «réflexes européens»: anticiper, partager l’information, faire des coalitions, éviter l’arrogance.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/france-at-war-inaugurates-eu-s-mutual-defence-clause/>.



*NATO: reluctance to pragmatism*

It is also interesting to note that the recent changes in French foreign policy practices have led to a more pragmatic and less confrontational approach. This is particularly evident when we turn to recent developments regarding NATO policy. Traditionally, French NATO policy has been characterized by continuity and confirmation of the 'Europeanization strategy', aiming at a more balanced alliance between a united Europe and the USA. Shortly after the ending of the Cold War, the issue of explicit French reintegration in NATO was opened; even though this took nearly 20 years to conclude, a process of 'creeping integration' into NATO's military structures was intensified (Ghez and Larrabee 2009).

The first attempt to bring France fully back into NATO took place in the 1990s and must be seen in relation to the establishment of a political union (the EU) with 'the eventual framing of a common defence policy, which might in time lead to a common defence' (EU 1992: Title V). It was believed there was now a window of opportunity for finally realizing the ambition of *l'Europe de la défense*. From 1995, the first reintegration efforts initiated by François Mitterrand were continued by Jacques Chirac. France joined every NATO committee except the Defence Planning Committee and the Nuclear Planning Group. More importantly, it regularly agreed to deploy forces to NATO operations, as in Bosnia (IFOR and SFOR), Kosovo (KFOR) and later Afghanistan (ISAF). Indeed, for a period in the 1990s, France had more troops under a NATO 'flag' than did the USA (Pesme 2010). All the same, the reintegration attempt initiated by Mitterrand failed in 1997. The other NATO members, the USA in particular, were not ready for what the French perceived as a 'real' Europeanization of the alliance—which, according to the French, would have included the creation of a strong and autonomous European pillar within NATO. When Chirac and his government set as a condition for French reintegration that the strategic command of AFSOUTH, an important regional command headed by a US general, be given to a European (preferably French), this attempt was doomed to fail (Rieker 2013).

Despite a new phase of tensions between France and the USA after the Iraq War in 2003, 'creeping integration' continued. The fact that a resolution of the crisis over the Iraq War, in terms of reaching a NATO decision on support to Turkey, involved using the Defence Planning Committee (from which France had excluded itself) might also have conditioned French thinking about the disadvantages of its partial detachment. The result of this 'creeping integration' was that France became the largest single contributor to the NATO Response Force (Fortmann et al. 2010), it was amongst the top five contributors of troops to various NATO crisis-management operations, and amongst the principal funders of the Alliance (Pesme 2010, p. 48). In addition, since 2007 the French Air Force has repeatedly ensured the protection of airspace over Iceland and the Baltic countries (de Russé 2010).

Remaining outside NATO's military structure was making less and less political and military sense. On the one hand, it prevented France from exerting influence within the Alliance commensurate with its contribution to NATO's military operations. As Howorth (2010: 16) notes, it became increasingly absurd for the French Permanent Representative to NATO not to be able to participate in key strategic



discussions in the Defence Planning Committee, and only be informed later by the US ambassador on what had been decided. On 11 March 2009, President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that France would return to NATO's integrated military command structure (Rieker 2013).

### Instruments and the willingness to use them

In addition to having a strong executive, a skilled leadership and core positions in global and regional institutions, France has two very different instruments that are used actively to maintain and legitimize its status at the international level. First, it possesses a military capability, and the willingness to use it. Further, French political leadership has also given priority to maintaining soft power, through its impressive and strong cultural diplomacy. While the military capability certainly is material capital, the strength of it is not sufficient to uphold French great power status in itself. But, it becomes a status indicator through how it is deployed and combined with a soft power capacity. Compared to the capacities of other European countries, these instruments and the willingness to use them are unique features and show that France's ambitions of maintaining its status in international politics are still very much alive.

#### *Hard power: military strength and intelligence capacity*

In addition to the diplomatic efforts involved in gaining a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the development of French military strength with a nuclear arsenal was also an instrument for fulfilling de Gaulle's ambitions of *grandeur*. The initial idea was to develop a fully independent *force de frappe* (military strike force) capable of protecting France from Soviet or other foreign attack—independent of NATO, which de Gaulle considered to be unacceptably US dominated. In fact, the French nuclear arsenal has remained the third-largest nuclear-weapons force in the world, after the Russian Federation and the USA. The decision to develop such an independent capacity also made it possible for France to withdraw from NATO's integrated military structures in 1966 and to stay outside until 2009.

At the same time as the reintegration of France in NATO's integrated military structure had begun, Sarkozy also announced that the French Air Force-carried nuclear arsenal would be reduced by 30%. While Sarkozy had made this announcement in 2008, Hollande reaffirmed the importance of this capacity in 2015. Referring to the rapidly changing international situation, with the crisis in Ukraine and the increasing power of *Daech*,<sup>14</sup> he argued that the need for possible nuclear

<sup>14</sup> In 2014 the French government announced that it would use the Arabic-derived term 'Daech in place of the previous name for the Islamic State group, EIL, or 'Etat Islamique en Irak et au Levant.' Daech/Daesh is a short form of the full Arabic name for the Islamic State group, *al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi Iraq wa ash-Sham*. The explanation given by the then French Minister of Foreign Affairs was that it was



dissuasion was still present (*Le Figaro* 2015). The validity of this claim has been further reinforced with recent terrorist attacks in Paris. While maintaining this capacity is important for French global role, the decision to halt cuts in the defence budget is perhaps of more practical value, since this is a capacity that can actually be deployed.

As a consequence of the terrorist events in Paris in January 2015, President Hollande recalled his recent decision to review the military spending act and to allocate even more resources to this field, despite current budget constraints. He further announced that France's defence spending would grow by €3.8 billion over the next 4 years, probably bringing the country close to the NATO 2% defence spending target (Revault d'Allonnes and Roger 2015). While France has maintained military strength, it has also shown a willingness to deploy forces when needed to protect French, but also European interests and security.<sup>15</sup> It has also taken initiatives outside the institutional structures to improve the capacity to act rapidly, such as the recent European Intervention Initiative (EI2).

### *La Francophonie and the cultural diplomacy*

While military strength is an important instrument and status indicator, France also relies on its impressive cultural diplomatic network and approach. Indeed, the strong relationship between political and cultural activities is an essential element in French foreign policy. Cultural diplomacy has long traditions and can trace its roots back to pre-revolutionary *Ancien Régime*. However, it was between 1870 and 1914 that French diplomats set about advancing and defending the French language in international organizations, making French the universal language of law and diplomacy. This, together with the birth of *Alliance française* in 1883 and *l'Office National des Universités et des Ecoles françaises* in 1910, was a landmark event in modern French cultural diplomacy (Lane 2013: 11). Interestingly, during the Second World War, the stakes were not solely diplomatic and military. Together with *Alliance française*, 'France libre' under the leadership of de Gaulle paid special attention to winning over the schools abroad, and the head office of *Alliance française* was moved from Paris to London. From 1945 onwards, French foreign cultural promotion had three objectives: restore the flow of intellectual exchanges interrupted for 5 years; to meet the needs of countries requiring teachers, conferences and books; and to prove the vitality of French thought despite all the recent setbacks. This period saw the creation of the first positions of 'cultural advisors' in the French embassies (Lane 2013: 14–15). At the same time, decolonization served to bring about a redefinition

Footnote 14 (continued)

important to distinguish this group from the religion, and also not to indicate that the group was a state, which it is not <http://www.franceinfo.fr/actu/article/doi-dire-daesh-ou-etat-islamique-568431>.

<sup>15</sup> However, this is only possible at the expense of complying with the Treaty of the EU, and the rules of the Eurozone, which require a public deficit to be no higher than 3% of the GDP. So, far France has got acceptance for this due to the security situation, but the question is how long this will last. France has already got a two-year prolongation to get down the deficit two times—in 2013 and in 2015 and the Commission has now refused in September this year to give a third prolongation.



of these activities, to aim more at assisting the new authorities. The modernization of French cultural diplomacy was organized around three key areas: promoting and teaching French language, promoting exchanges and promoting French international media, such as TV5 and *Radio France Internationale*. In 1970, a multilateral organization of countries that use the French language was established. France has been particularly active in this organization; in fact, Article 87 of the French Constitution guarantees French support for ‘la Francophonie’:

The Republic participates in the development of solidarity and cooperation between the states and the peoples having the French language in common.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1990, an agency for French education abroad was established (AEFE—L’Agence pour l’enseignement français à l’étranger) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the aims of the agency was to assist the 494 French schools (primary, secondary and high schools) established in 136 countries around the world to contribute to promote French language and culture.<sup>17</sup> While maintaining these French teaching establishments abroad is crucial, the founding of the *Institut français* in 2011 also aimed at bringing new impetus to French foreign cultural policy. As the successor to, amongst others, the *Cultures France* association, this new state organization was given a broader remit: to the dissemination and promotion of artistic exchanges were added the distribution of books, support for media resource centres and the French film industry and the promotion of French thought and scientific knowledge, with assistance to the teaching of the French language and training of those involved. Today, *l’Institut français*, a dedicated body answerable to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has a foreign cultural remit in the coordination of over 150 Institutes throughout the world.

This indicates that French cultural diplomacy is perceived as important today as ever before. As noted, the ambition ‘to ensure the presence of French ideas, the French language and French culture’ is stated as one of five key priorities in French foreign policy. In August 2015, President Hollande highlighted the importance of maintaining this role:

I also welcome the role of the cultural, scientific, educational and academic network abroad [...]. It’s significant; few countries have this ability. Ours has more ambition, because it wants to spread the influence of Francophonie, but it’s more than that: to get people speaking French, writing in French, to welcome every culture, including in our institutions. It’s about ensuring France can be fully welcome, esteemed, eagerly-awaited, and from this viewpoint what you do, what this network is capable of promoting, is essential for the idea of France (Hollande 2015).

And, this is also emphasized by Macron in a similar speech 2 years later:

<sup>16</sup> La République participe au développement de la solidarité et de la coopération entre les États et les peuples ayant le français en partage (<http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/politique-etrangere-de-la-france/francophonie-et-langue-francaise/la-francophonie/la-francophonie-en-france/>).

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.aefe.fr>.





[...] those who think that we can cast aside the French language as a sideshow are wrong. We inherited this, and so we think we can forget about it, but we must develop it further, because it is a tool for achieving the attractiveness and influence I have mentioned, and our ability to convey our message everywhere (Macron 2017a).

The international success of the French series ‘*le Bureau de légende*’<sup>18</sup> on the inner life of French intelligence has also contributed to a positive image of French power. This may or may not be intentional and a direct result of clever French cultural diplomacy. In any case, it contributes to a significant strengthening of French attractiveness and thus its symbolic power.

We have noted broad power repertoire of hard and soft policy tools that are maintained, developed and adapted for the purpose of maintaining a specific role for France and French thinking in the world. This continued willingness to project hard as well as soft power is not merely a result of the desire for national power and influence but also legitimized by a more fundamental belief in the continued value of the French universal mission.

While the belief in this universal mission has always been at the core of French foreign policy, the narrative has changed in accordance with changes in the international context. In a world where the liberal order is increasingly threatened, including from within, there seems to be a nice window of opportunity for France to take on the role as the guardian of the liberal order and also get support for this leading role in the group of countries that want to preserve it. For the current French political leadership, this role can only be fulfilled through a combination of hard and soft power, which is currently forming the very basis of its status internationally.

Applying Social Identification Theory to this period, these more recent changes in French foreign policy discourse and practices, with a greater focus on the normative foundations of French universalism and status, differ from the social mobility or social competition strategies from the Cold War period where the emphasis was put merely on material factors. Thus, this new type of French foreign policy strategy is better described as a type of social creativity where the French political leaders, and Emmanuel Macron in particular, have been clever at reinventing a new role for France in the world by putting emphasis on other—and more acceptable—dimensions on which the country could be perceived to be superior.

## Concluding remarks

This article has examined French exceptionalism, identifying its main characteristics and seeing how these are framed and approached today. We asked in the introduction whether this exceptionalism is legitimized by references to a more

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<sup>18</sup> *Le Bureau des Légendes* is a French political thriller television series created by *Éric Rochant* and produced by Canal+, which revolves around the lives of agents of the DGSE (General Directorate of External Security), France’s principal external security service. It has received positive reviews in both France and other countries and won several awards.



glorious past, or whether it has been given a new *raison d'être*. We find that the four status indicators identified and investigated in this paper (historical legitimacy, strong and competent diplomatic corps, influence in the main international and regional institutions, as well as a continued capacity to project both hard and soft power) are still valid, but that they have all been adapted to a new reality. While French hard power and willingness to use it often is referred to when talking about French power or influence, it is by no means sufficient to claim any type of grandeur on the global stage today.

As mentioned earlier, Social Identification Theory (SIT) and the strategies of social mobility, social competition and social creativity are useful and can help us better understand how French power politics has changed. While the immediate post-war years could be characterized as a period of social mobility in France with membership in the UN security council, the main part of the Cold War period must be understood as a period with social competition with the military build-up and the French force the *frappe*. However, the recent changes in French foreign policy discourse and practices that is increasingly emphasizing the normative value of French universalism could rather be described as a type of social creativity. Historical references to the French Revolution, the Enlightenment and the importance of promoting French values as a universal good are not often made explicit. Still, they emerge (expressed indirectly or subtly) in times of crisis and in order to legitimize French action. But without being made explicit, this seems to serve as a kind of silent and consent-based steering wheel for French foreign policy.

The main reason why France has managed to transform this grandeur into international influence seem to be linked to the status indicators identified in this paper—the presence of robust national institutions, a strong executive and a skilled corps of higher civil servants who also are convinced that France has an important international role to play. In addition, France has managed to find a place at the core of key international and regional institutions, and has also been able to adapt its approach to changing realities by promoting a progressive revision of the UNSC, by giving continued priority to strengthening the EU, and since the election of Macron, also taking the lead in this endeavour and, finally by continuing to strengthen its hard and soft national instruments for international influence, military capacities and cultural diplomacy. The question is whether this will be adequate for France to maintain its status in an international context that is changing. The French experience with a period of reduced influence due to decades with a weakening economy in an enlarged and German-dominated EU, has led to a change in strategy. As the analysis in this article has shown, it has gradually led to a French foreign policy strategy that is seeking legitimacy by different means. Since early 2000, we have seen a shift towards French status seeking by promoting itself as the guardian of liberal values—referring increasingly to the normative foundations of its foreign policy. While this shift has been ongoing for some time, and was already visible in France's strong opposition to the Iraq War, as well as Hollande's insistence on a UN mandate before intervening in Mali, it has become far more explicit under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron.



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