

# The Other Cold War

by Louise-Marie de Busschère

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**In an era marked by ideological conflict and geopolitical rivalry between the two superpowers, France managed to chart its own course, far from traditional bipolar frameworks.**

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About: Nicolas Badalassi, *France's Mediterranean Cold War: From Charles de Gaulle to François Mitterand*, New York, Routledge, 2026, 316 p.

Nicolas Badalassi's book, *France's Mediterranean Cold War: From Charles de Gaulle to François Mitterand*,<sup>1</sup> offers a bold and nuanced reinterpretation of international relations in the Mediterranean over the period 1962-1979. The author does not limit his discussion to a simple confrontation between East and West, but uses a multi-scalar approach that highlights the central role played by the Mediterranean as a world-space and a geopolitical laboratory for French foreign policy. Drawing on a rich body of archives (French, American, and Soviet), he shows how, through a combination of dialogue, independence, and pragmatism, Paris managed to forge a foreign policy adapted to the realities of its regional environment while also pursuing its international ambitions as a middle power.

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<sup>1</sup> Original French version: *La France, la guerre froide et la Méditerranée: Des accords d'Évian à la Perestroïka*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2024.

## A Mediterraneanization of the Tools of Power

The Mediterranean as a vital space for European and French security is the focus of this book on the history of international relations. Badalassi highlights the importance of the region for France's Cold War doctrine, from General de Gaulle to François Mitterrand.

Far from being a simple theater of conflict between blocs, the Mediterranean served as a strategic space for France to defend its autonomy. Paris did not adopt a purely military posture, but showed a remarkable ability to build strategic diplomatic and economic alliances. In this context, France's doctrine of "all-out defense"—the pursuit of sophisticated nuclear weapons combined with the export of strategic equipment—served to strengthen its position on the international stage. From 1958 onwards, in the wake of decolonization and global repositioning, France exploited regional crises—from the Algerian War to Middle Eastern conflicts—in order to assert itself as an arbiter and mediator. It did not remain a passive spectator, but actively reinterpreted the anti-Great Powers slogan that had been popularized by independent Algeria: "The Mediterranean for the Mediterranean peoples." This simultaneously symbolic and operational leitmotif prompted the French government to pursue a "third way"—a strategy that was both independent of the superpowers' interests and deeply rooted in local realities. Using this slogan as a multifunctional tool, French diplomacy was able to legitimize its actions on the ground, mobilize regional actors, and position Paris as a power capable of reconciling national interests with collective imperatives.

One of the book's major contributions is the analysis of the way France sought to adapt and reorient European security and cooperation instruments in order to serve its strategic objectives in the Mediterranean. Badalassi shows how, in the face of institutions such as the EEC, NATO, and the CSCE, Paris undertook a genuine project of "Mediterraneanization." This project translated into a double process: on the one hand, an active engagement within transatlantic structures to influence broad policy directions; on the other hand, the promotion of a pan-European and Arab discourse that redefined the contours of international cooperation to fully integrate the specific challenges of the Mediterranean basin. By steering European policies toward greater consideration of energy, environmental, and economic issues, France worked to build bridges between the industrialized North and the developing South while also asserting its strategic autonomy.

## **A Delicate Balance Between Alliances and Autonomy**

Badalassi describes France's relentless quest for a delicate balance in foreign policy. Paris oscillated between several poles—Trans-Atlantic solidarity, dialogue with an opportunistic USSR, and support for non-aligned countries—in order to establish itself as a credible alternative to the two superpowers. This intermediary position, at once flexible and resolutely autonomous, made it possible to preserve the country's strategic independence while maintaining cooperation with key international actors. France thus maneuvered between traditional alliances and its own ambitions, continually adapting its strategy in response to crises and geopolitical shifts. Regional conflicts—the Six-Day War, the Cyprus crisis, the Yom Kippur War, etc.—prompted French leaders to constantly reconsider their alliances and to strengthen an agile diplomacy capable of adapting to a perpetually changing global environment. Thus, the 1958 Lebanese crisis illustrates how, faced with Anglo-Saxon dominance, De Gaulle rethought France's strategic autonomy, proposing to expand NATO's scope of action to include the Mediterranean as a national priority.

From 1961 onwards, the Mediterranean basin became a center of gravity for the non-aligned movement, particularly under the leadership of Tito's Yugoslavia and Nasser's Egypt. Capitalizing on the benefits of European détente, Pompidou distinguished himself by his rejection of neutrality and his commitment to addressing contemporary crises—including the oil crisis and the Yom Kippur War—in ways that redefined the strategic landscape of the Mediterranean as a transitional space between the Arab world and Europe. Under Pompidou and then Giscard d'Estaing, France assumed a mediating role in the Arab-Israeli conflict with the double aim of promoting reconciliation and strengthening European security. Giscard d'Estaing's particularly proactive handling of the Cyprus crisis also illustrates this two-sided approach. Fueled by the territorial ambitions of Greece and Turkey, the Cyprus crisis revealed a vulnerability on NATO's southeastern flank that presented an opportunity for the deployment of Soviet forces. By mediating for a multilateral solution—rather than a bilateral one decided by the two superpowers—France was able to position itself as an indispensable partner in the region.

French foreign policy was nevertheless faced with major challenges, including increased competition from West Germany and the growing threat of Soviet expansion in the region. In the 1980s, François Mitterrand's presidency had to deal with the rise of identity-based and religious movements in the Arab-Muslim world, following which French diplomacy in the Mediterranean became characterized by what might be called "triumphant failure." Unprecedented security challenges severely tested France's capacity for influence, revealing the internal and external tensions that shaped its regional engagement.

## **The Cold War as Strategic Opportunity**

One of Badalassi's central arguments is that French leaders viewed the Cold War, not as an inevitable development, but as a major strategic opportunity. Far from adopting a passive attitude, they exploited East-West tensions to assert French sovereignty and consolidate its presence on the international stage. The book highlights how, by skillfully using regional crises, Paris was able to leverage moments of tension for its own benefit. Thus, the Cuban Crisis is not only analyzed through the lens of nuclear confrontation, but is recontextualized as a turning point in France's approach to the Cold War. This approach was further revised following the Algerian War and the wave of independence. In a context of growing Soviet influence in North Africa, the Mediterranean emerged as a privileged space for Franco-Soviet dialogue. France developed surveillance and intelligence mechanisms that allowed it to gauge the Soviet presence in the region and to initiate negotiations that helped to ease certain tensions.

Badalassi's interpretive lens enriches and nuances the analysis of French diplomacy by situating it within an international context marked by constant shifts in the balance of power. Rather than remaining a passive spectator, France skillfully maneuvered between the clientelist strategies of the two superpowers, all the while cultivating strategic alliances that allowed it to present itself as a sound alternative alongside the nascent Non-Aligned Movement. This approach was evident in the handling of several key dossiers, including the colonels' putsch in Greece, the Maltese affair, or French involvement in Lebanon.

## A Renewed Historiographical Approach

Another contribution of this work is its historiographical approach that draws on the “New Diplomatic History.” Badalassi brings together several strands of scholarship—the “Global Cold War,” the history of security and cooperation in Europe, and the history of France’s Arab policy—to offer a multi-scalar reading of Mediterranean issues. He challenges the compartmentalized approaches that, until now, have tended to treat French politics and the Cold War as distinct domains whenever the focus has shifted to the non-European world. Unlike these approaches, the book demonstrates that local, regional, and global dynamics are inextricably linked. Societal evolutions—from May 1968 to Corsican nationalism through immigration issues, Islamist terrorism, and the exodus of the Pieds-Noirs and Harkis—helped redefine French foreign policy by requiring the country’s leaders to take into account inseparable domestic dynamics. Intellectuals and civil society contributed to the French expertise on the Mediterranean, which had been inherited from the colonial experience but was now mobilized to rival Soviet influence.

The book does not merely describe historical events, but also offers a critique of French decision-making. As Badalassi makes clear, Quai d’Orsay diplomats maneuvered within sometimes rigid institutional structures, between national interests and global ambitions, to deal with a complex Mediterranean region that defied the purely bipolar logic of the Cold War. The book reveals the challenges of an independent, yet friendly policy that aimed to redefine French influence without undermining the NATO alliance framework. It throws fresh light on France’s handling of a complex international environment, stressing the interdependencies between the various actors and the different levels of action. Drawing on a meticulous examination of unpublished archives—from diplomatic documents to intelligence reports through presidential archives—Badalassi succeeds in deconstructing the traditional Cold War myth of an inevitable clash between two titans (the United States and the USSR), and offers a nuanced view of the evolution of French strategy, which constantly oscillated between continuity and rupture. In doing so, he highlights both overlooked regional dynamics and the role of middle powers in redefining the global balance of power.

## Global Vision *vs.* Local Perspectives

While the book stands out for its analytical depth and its ambition to redefine the contours of the Cold War, it also presents some limitations. Given the broad range of issues covered (political, military, economic, and societal issues), the argument is sometimes difficult to follow, making it hard to distinguish between continuities and ruptures in French foreign policy. Although the emphasis is on regional dynamics, the role of local actors, particularly Arab countries and Israel, is sometimes relegated to the background. The focus on the strategy pursued by French presidents and on France's relations with the two superpowers minimizes the importance of local perspectives, which could have been explored in more detail. And while the book does draw on American and Soviet archives, most of the sources are French, raising the possibility of documentary bias.

Despite a stated desire to break with deterministic approaches to the Cold War, some passages tend to present historical developments as the inevitable outcome of a preexisting logic, thereby obscuring historical ruptures and contingencies. Badalassi, however, acknowledges this problem and calls for further research, particularly on the influence of expert networks, Franco-German cooperation in the Mediterranean, and the impact of environmental and identity-based movements on French diplomacy. Overall, he invites us to view the Cold War not as a rigid binary confrontation, but as a set of constantly evolving relationships through which France helped to redefine, autonomously and decisively, the international balance of power in the second half of the twentieth century.

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