

France's Climate Diplomacy Between Identity and Interest: Strategic Adjustments After the Russia-Ukraine War

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Abstract:

This study focuses on the strategic adjustments in France's climate diplomacy following the Russia-Ukraine war. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of realism and constructivism, it analyzes France's policy shifts under the dual pressures of energy crisis and geopolitical upheaval, examining the inherent conflict between institutional dependence and strategic autonomy in its climate diplomacy, as well as the tension between its constructed identity as a "climate leader" and its tangible national interests. The findings reveal that the war prompted France to reassess energy security and industrial competitiveness, resulting in pragmatic retrenchment of climate policies—manifested through restarting coal-fired power plants, delaying nuclear phase-outs, seeking exemptions within mechanisms like the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), and reducing climate finance commitments. These actions exposed France's "theory versus reality" dilemma in global climate governance. Consequently, France attempted identity reconstruction toward a "green pragmatist," accepting a devaluation of its moral capital. This research offers a new perspective for understanding the strategic logic of French climate diplomacy and its policy adaptations under geopolitical shocks. It underscores the imperative to establish more resilient international climate institutions capable of absorbing geopolitical disruptions.

Keywords: France; climate diplomacy; realist theory; institutional dependence; identity construction.

1. Introduction

In the global climate governance system, France has frequently assumed the role of "climate leader" on

the international stage since the Paris Agreement. Its climate diplomacy not only carries the demand for shaping international image, but is also constrained by domestic interests and geopolitical realities. The

outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 has become a key turning point in France's climate diplomacy strategy-the intensification of the European energy crisis, the decline in domestic industrial competitiveness, and the divergence of the EU's climate agenda [1], forcing France to recalibrate climate goals against national interests. This study aims to answer the question: How will France strategically adjust its climate leadership identity and national interests after the Russia-Ukraine war?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multidimensional Exploration of Climate Governance Research in France

In the field of climate governance research, many scholars have engaged in discussions centered on the practices of various countries. Climate diplomacy has become an important arena for competition and cooperation among major powers [2]. A study has pointed out that France has formulated a climate governance plan based on the principle of "energy conservation and emission reduction," which unifies energy and climate policies, and proposes five key action plans encompassing circular economy, employment, and ecological transformation, demonstrating its independent leadership [3]. Other scholars believe that as a core country in the European Union, France's climate policies are constrained by international norms and influenced by domestic interest groups. Climate diplomacy has transcended traditional environmental issues to become a key indicator of national soft power and global leadership [4]. At the global level, France actively responds to United Nations initiatives [5], demonstrating a sense of responsibility in leading the global energy transition. The above studies have mostly affirmed France's climate leadership position from the perspective of policy objectives, but in terms of practical operation, there is still a lack of in-depth analysis of the multiple constraints faced by French diplomacy.

2.2 Theoretical and Practical Discrepancies in France's Climate Governance Approach

From a theoretical perspective, the French government emphasizes the urgency of climate action. President Macron frequently advocates for global climate cooperation in international forums and has explicitly committed to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050[6][7], reflecting France's intent to strengthen its climate leadership.

From a practical perspective, France's climate governance faces profound domestic structural contradictions. The European energy crisis triggered by the Russia-Ukraine

conflict has forced France to re-examine its energy structure. While social events such as farmer protests and the "Yellow Vests" movement have directly exposed the practical challenges in implementing climate policies. Scholarly research indicates that the French government has made compromises on carbon tax policies [8]. The essence is the result of the game between climate ambition and domestic political stability demands. Industrial lobbying in the fields of agriculture and energy has made it even more difficult for France to balance the construction of its identity as a "climate leader" with domestic protectionist tendencies in climate diplomacy [9].

In the EU's power structure, France's climate leadership position also faces multiple challenges. Germany and Nordic countries, leveraging their advantages in renewable energy technology, continue to erode France's influence in the EU's climate agenda; meanwhile, Eastern European countries' resistance to stringent emissions reduction targets further complicates France's efforts to coordinate climate policies [10]. The convergence of these internal and external pressures has led France to adopt a more pragmatic approach in its climate diplomacy strategy post Russia-Ukraine war, with even some policy retrenchment observed on certain issues.

The above difficulties collectively reveal the typical "dual pressure diplomatic dilemma" in France's climate governance: on the one hand, it needs to maintain its leading position in the international climate system, and on the other hand, it needs to respond to domestic social stability and industrial interests demands. This structural tension profoundly affects the formulation and implementation of France's climate policy.

2.3 Research Limitations

There are still three research gaps in the analysis of France's climate diplomacy in existing studies. First, although academia has conducted in-depth discussions on the EU's overall climate policy coordination mechanism [11], there has a lack of systematic analysis of France's unique strategic positioning and differentiated action logic as a core member state of the EU. For example, while dynamics such as Germany and Nordic countries squeezing France's influence and Eastern European countries resisting emission reduction targets [10] have been recorded, they have not revealed how France seeks leadership breakthroughs as a "middle power" in the EU power structure. Second, the energy security crisis triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war has reshaped the global climate governance landscape. Although some studies have noted the urgency of energy transition [7], how France balances energy security [12] with climate commitments [13], and

whether its diplomatic strategy has shifted toward a stronger realist orientation, have not been sufficiently theorized. Third, as a “middle power,” France pursues a leadership role in the climate regime while being constrained by its limited capabilities [14]. How this role tension affects the consistency and effectiveness of its climate policies has not been clearly analyzed in existing literature [8]. Fourthly, previous studies have emphasized the construction of France’s climate leadership [2], but mostly focused on policy objectives. There is still insufficient explanation for the reasons behind policy contraction in real crises, especially the lack of a systematic analysis of the relationship between identity and interests of medium-sized powers. This study fills this gap through a dual theoretical perspective.

3. Theoretical Framework

To deeply analyze France’s strategic adjustments in climate diplomacy and its internal contradictions after the Russia-Ukraine war, this study adopts a dual theoretical approach combining realist and constructivist perspectives. Realist theory provides the core logic for understanding France’s policy shift. This theory views states as rational actors whose primary goal is to maximize security and material interests [15,16]. From a realistic perspective, international institutions (such as the Paris Agreement) are products of national interest games, and the fundamental driving force for countries to participate in and comply with institutional rules lies in their alignment with national interest expectations. However, when core national interests are seriously threatened, such as the energy security crisis and industrial shock caused by the Russia-Ukraine war, the state will prioritize safeguarding these material needs, even resorting to breaking or shelving its previous institutional commitments and regulatory constraints, demonstrating strategic autonomy. This realism-based logic explains pragmatic policy reversals during the crisis, such as restarting coal-fired power generation, delaying energy transition, seeking exemptions for high-carbon industries, and providing subsidies.

Meanwhile, constructivist theory offers a critical perspective for analyzing the identity dilemma in France’s climate diplomacy. Constructivism emphasizes that national identity, interests, and behavior are not fixed but are continuously constructed and reshaped through shared concepts, norms, and discourses in international interactions [17]. France has carefully shaped and maintained its identity as a “global leader in climate governance” through successfully hosting COP21, promoting the Paris Agreement, and President Macron’s “climate leadership” rhetoric. This identity carries specific normative expectations (such as

policy ambition and keeping promises). However, after the Russia-Ukraine War, France’s policy practice deviated significantly from the norms required by its identity as a “climate leader.” This inconsistency between words and actions has triggered strong negative feedback from the international community. This feedback poses a challenge to the legitimacy of France’s identity, leading to the collapse crisis of its carefully constructed identity as a “climate leader.” Faced with this crisis, France is attempting to reshape its identity through new discourse and practices in order to salvage international credibility and adapt to the new reality.

These two theoretical approaches are not mutually exclusive but rather jointly reveal the complex motivations and underlying tensions driving France’s adjustments in climate diplomacy. Realism explains the material drivers of policy adjustments (prioritizing security and interests), while constructivism elucidates the impact of these adjustments on identity norms and the resulting international interactions (identity disintegration and reshaping). Both point to the profound structural contradiction that France faces between maintaining its international institutional identity and safeguarding its national interests.

4. France’s Climate Diplomacy Faces a Contradiction between Institutional Dependence and Strategic Autonomy

From a realist theoretical perspective, France’s deep dependence on the international climate regime is essentially a tool for achieving strategic interests. On the one hand, with the legitimacy endorsement of international climate regimes such as the Paris Agreement, France has strategically cultivated its identity as a “climate leader” on the international stage and enhance its influence in global climate governance. On the other hand, the international climate regime provides France with technological, financial, and other resource support, as well as a coordination platform for climate cooperation with other countries, all of which contribute to expanding France’s international influence.

4.1 Identity vs. Policy

France, as the main initiator of the Paris Agreement and host of COP21, has deeply embedded itself in the UN-led international climate governance system. By actively promoting the formulation of global climate goals and rules, France has not only strengthened its agenda setting power in international climate affairs but also relied on the institutional framework to continuously consolidate its “climate leader” discourse power. President Macron explicitly

declared at the 2017 United Nations General Assembly that “we only have one planet, there is no Planet B,” and pledged to “make our planet great again,” reflecting France’s strong commitment to shaping “ecological sovereignty” and climate leadership [6]. In terms of institutional commitments, France’s Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) under the Paris Agreement set specific targets: to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 40% from 1990 levels by 2030 and commit to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050 [13]. This system empowers France with agenda setting power and international discourse, making it a symbolic leader in global climate governance.

However, the energy and economic security crisis triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war has exposed the fragility of institutional commitments. Under the framework of realism theory, France prioritizes safeguarding these core interests: The French government swiftly adjusted its energy policy by the end of 2022, announcing the restart of facilities like the Saint-Avold power plant and delaying the closure of plants like the Fessenheim nuclear power plant [12]. This policy is explicitly included in the 2023 Energy and Climate Plan Draft (PPE Draft): “Allow temporary use of fossil energy facilities during energy emergencies” [18]. During parliamentary debates, ruling party lawmakers repeatedly emphasized that “energy supply security is the overriding priority at present” [19], directly denying its international obligation to phase out coal-fired power.

4.2 Institutions vs. Interests

This series of policy shifts sharply conflicts with France’s commitments under the international climate regime. The emission reduction targets promised by France in the Paris Agreement and the direction of accelerating the phase out of fossil fuels and developing renewable energy in the energy transition have been postponed or postponed due to domestic energy security needs. At the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28) in 2023, France maintained its support for keeping global temperature rise below 1.5 °C, but failed to propose specific measures aligned with its NDC commitments and the accelerated transition path outlined in the draft PPE. On the contrary, the French Permanent Representation to the European Union submitted a position paper calling for the establishment of a “flexible climate compliance mechanism based on national energy sovereignty” [20]. This dynamic adjustment clearly demonstrates the structural game between France’s international institutional commitments and domestic practical needs. External crises have forced France to reassess its reliance on the international climate regime, exposing deep contradictions between

maintaining its institutional identity and safeguarding its core interests, and highlighting the complex tension between international institutional constraints and national autonomous decision-making.

Within the European Union, France has actively promoted flexible reforms in energy policy regulation among member states, calling for the establishment of an energy coordination mechanism more suited to the needs of the post-Russia-Ukraine war era. Particularly during the critical phase of negotiations on the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), France has requested a delay in full implementation until 2030, citing the protection of agriculture and aviation industries, and has added exemption clauses for products such as beef and aviation fuel [14]. To alleviate international pressure, France launched the “Climate Resilience Alliance” initiative, redefining energy security as a “prerequisite for climate governance.” It seeks to redefine and expand the scope of climate governance to secure institutional space and influence for domestic policy adjustments based on energy security and industrial protection [20]. France’s intention is to transform its domestic energy security demands and industrial protection needs into a collective action framework at the EU level or to secure special arrangements, thereby reducing the international public opinion pressure and institutional legitimacy erosion caused by unilateral policy adjustments. This strategy not only preserves France’s participation and presence in the international climate regime but also opens up new interpretative pathways for its domestic energy policy autonomy, demonstrating France’s proactive efforts to seek institutional rebalancing amid contradictions.

France’s climate diplomacy practice clearly reveals its dynamic balance between international commitments and national practical interests. When the international environment is stable, France actively utilizes institutional platforms such as the Paris Agreement to strategically shape its leadership image and draw institutional dividends. However, the survival challenges caused by the Russia-Ukraine war have forced France to quickly prioritize energy security, resulting in a significant deviation between its domestic energy policies (such as restarting coal-fired power plants and delaying nuclear phase out) and existing climate commitments. To bridge this gap and maintain its international status, France has taken a dual path: internally seeking flexibility in EU rules (such as CBAM extensions and exemptions), and externally redefining the scope of climate governance through initiatives such as the Climate Resilience Alliance, incorporating energy security into its core narrative. This effort aims to seek legitimacy for its policy adjustments, essentially reflecting France’s sustained and strategic adaptive repo-

sitioning between maintaining the identity halo bestowed by the system and defending its uncompromising national core interests.

5. France's Climate Diplomacy Faces a Contradiction between Identity Construction and Practical Interests

France has consistently sought to shape its image as a "global leader in climate governance." As the host of the 2015 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP21) and a key architect of the Paris Agreement, France has promoted its identity through diplomatic practices such as hosting this landmark international summit, launching the "Climate Ambition" initiative, and President Macron's statements at multiple international forums (such as the 2017 United Nations General Assembly) declaring, "France is back and will be at the forefront of climate action," "We are the guardians of the Paris Agreement," [6]. France has continuously shaped its moral image. This identity construction relies not only on France's own policy discourse but also on the international community's response and recognition of its climate initiatives (such as the success of COP21), creating an interactive cycle of identity recognition within the multilateral institutional framework.

However, after the Russia-Ukraine war, a series of realistic policy adjustments adopted by France under multiple pressures sharply conflicted with the role model required by its "leadership" identity. The intensity of this contradiction and the international response it triggers vary by policy field, forming a clear contrast:

5.1 Typical policy: Domestic energy security and industrial protection

In response to the energy crisis, France restarted coal-fired power plants in the winter of 2022 [11], directly violating its commitment to phase out coal-fired power by 2022, significantly weakening its "sustainability role performance." Meanwhile, under pressure from the "Yellow Vests" movement, the government not only scrapped fuel tax reforms but also provided 5.2 billion euros in subsidies to the steel and automotive industries in 2023 to offset carbon costs [21,22], a move has been termed by scholars a "structural compromise on climate ambition" [8]. This disconnect between words and actions has led to a serious legitimacy crisis for its carefully constructed identity as a "climate leader." In 2023, the French government introduced policies to provide billions of euros in subsidies and electricity price compensation to high energy consuming industries such as the automobiles and steel in order to

maintain their market competitiveness, effectively relaxing strict carbon emission regulations and transition speed requirements for these industries [18].

Intensity of contradiction is moderate. Mainly reflecting the conflict between domestic survival pressures (energy security, social stability, economic competitiveness) and climate ambitions. Such policies are often defended as "temporary measures in emergency situations" or "necessary measures to ensure social equity during the transition period," and although their impact on the identity of "leaders" is direct, there is still room for defense.

Triggered widespread skepticism and damaged France's image. The United Nations Environment Programme report implicitly criticized the "separation of words and deeds," while Germany's *Der Spiegel* mocked Macron as the "coal president." Although criticized, it has not yet triggered a public rupture or systemic collapse of trust among the closest allies, such as the core partners of the European Union.

5.2 Typical Policy: Self-interest in CBAM negotiations

In the negotiations of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a key climate policy tool of the European Union, France has publicly demanded a "ten-year transition period for agriculture" to protect its farmers and Airbus Group, who account for 20% of the EU's agricultural production. "It is necessary to protect our industries and employment from unfair competition" and promote the inclusion of beef in the exemption list [23].

Intensity of contradiction is high. This move directly challenges the unity, authority, and fairness of EU climate policy, especially given France's self-proclaimed role as a climate leader within the EU. Its protectionist tendencies sharply contradict the role norms expected of a "climate leader," which should promote collective ambition and uphold rules, resulting in sharp contradictions and tensions.

It has sparked strong backlash from allies and condemnation from developing countries. German Vice Chancellor Robert Habeck sharply criticized this move, stating, "It contradicts the EU's goal of leading global climate governance and undermines the rules of the single market and the unity and authority of climate policy" [23]. The African Group condemned this as "climate colonialism" in the COP28 statement [24]. This directly undermines France's core leadership credibility within the EU and damages its global moral image, creating a significant "reverse identity feedback loop."

5.3 Typical Policy: Shrinking Climate Finance

Commitments

France has failed to fulfill its climate finance commitments to developing countries. According to a report by the French Development Agency (AFD), actual climate finance disbursements in 2023 amounted to only 2.5 billion euros, less than 63% of the committed 4 billion euros [21]; OECD data further reveals that the funding availability rate for adaptation in the least developed countries is less than 30% [22].

Intensity of contradiction is the highest. Financial commitments are at the core of the Paris Agreement and the principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” and are a key manifestation of “climate leaders” fulfilling their international responsibilities and maintaining trust between the Global North and South. The systematic and large-scale reduction of funds is the most blatant violation of its international responsibility commitments, completely exposing the emptiness of identity discourse and reaching the peak of contradictory tension.

It leads to the most severe trust crisis and moral bankruptcy. According to the United Nations Green Climate Fund (GCF) meeting records, representatives from developing countries (such as the African Group and the Alliance of Small Island States) directly criticized France and other developed countries at the GCF Board meeting for failing to fulfill their financial commitments, accusing them of “submerging our lands with hollow promises” and emphasizing that this undermines mutual trust and the foundation of trust and cooperation between the Global North and South [24]. This marks a fundamental collapse of France’s carefully crafted identity as a “responsible leader” and a serious damage to the legitimacy foundation of its climate diplomacy.

5.4 Identity Collapse and Strategic Transformation

The sustained negative feedback from the international community (from questioning to condemnation to accusations) has formed a strong “deconstruction cycle” of France’s identity as a “climate leader.” Unable to fully maintain its absolute moral authority and policy consistency as a “climate leader,” the French government has gradually transitioned toward a “green pragmatist” identity in its high-level rhetoric and diplomatic practices to salvage its credibility. Macron declared at the 2023 EU Summit: “France must seek a balance between energy sovereignty, economic competitiveness, and climate goals” [20]. Although this identity reconstruction alleviates domestic pressure, it severely devalues France’s decades-accumulated climate moral capital. Though this strategic shift has not entirely eliminated the fundamental tension between

identity and interests, France attempts to transform the current contradictions and difficulties into shaping a more “realistic and feasible” new climate governance paradigm, demonstrating its dynamic adaptability in the game between international institutional constraints and national interests.

The gap between the shaping of France’s identity as a “climate leader” and its practical policies constitutes the fundamental contradiction in its climate diplomacy. Although the image of moral leadership has been successfully established through discourse construction and multilateral institutional platforms (such as COP21), the chain reaction caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict forced France to make policy choices that significantly deviate from that identity in key areas. From the emergency retreat of domestic energy policies, selfish demands in negotiations on key climate tools of the European Union, to the systematic reduction of funding commitments to developing countries, it not only challenges the internal norms of its leadership role at different intensities (such as collective responsibility and international moral responsibility), but also triggers a progressive negative feedback from the international community, from questioning to condemnation to trust collapse. This sustained external ‘deconstruction cycle’ ultimately shook the foundation of its identity, forcing France to strategically shift towards the identity of a ‘green pragmatist’, attempting to maintain a certain degree of climate discourse while safeguarding core interests. However, although this transformation has practical adaptability, it inevitably comes at the cost of overdrawing its long-term accumulated climate moral assets, profoundly revealing the fragility and compromise nature of identity construction in the face of harsh practical interests considerations.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals how the Russia-Ukraine war has forced France to reconfigure its realist priorities in climate diplomacy. When energy security crises (such as the restart of coal-fired power plants) and industrial competition pressures (subsidies for high-carbon industries) threaten national core interests, France chooses to set aside institutional commitments and identity norms, highlighting the fundamental logic of a sovereign state’s “survival first” approach.

The French case exposes the deep-seated contradictions in global climate governance: first, the institutional dilemma manifests itself in the leading country of the Paris Agreement being the first to relax restrictions on fossil fuels; second, the identity implementation dilemma reflects the international trust crisis triggered by the regression of

“climate leader” (such as CBAM exemption requests); Finally, the diplomatic dilemma of medium-sized powers reveals the reality that their leadership ambitions are constrained by their strength—they are forced to compromise with Germany’s climate policy within the European Union and seriously breach their aid commitments to developing countries.

The experience of France provides key insights for understanding the logic of climate diplomacy among middle powers: its climate leadership position is not an inherent attribute, and its effectiveness depends on a stable external environment, domestic resource support, and the ability to deliver. Crisis is an important test. A carefully constructed normative identity is easily shaken in times of conflict of interest and has high maintenance costs. Faced with dual pressures between large and small countries, strategies often involve balancing ideals and reality.

The Russia-Ukraine war warns that the global climate governance system is unable to cope with geopolitical crises and needs to build a more resilient institutional framework: embedding crisis response clauses in mechanisms such as the Paris Agreement, allowing countries to temporarily adjust their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) paths in the event of survival shocks, but with strict conditions and deadlines. Encouraging the exploration of alternative ways of contribution, such as France increasing the transfer of clean technologies. Establish a stricter crisis period information disclosure and review mechanism to enhance transparency and peer review, and maintain institutional credibility.

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