

To Be Feared Is to Be Free: Macron's Realist Turn

Written by Arthur Michelino

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ARTHUR MICHELINO, NOV 3 2025

On 13 July 2025, on the eve of France's national holiday, Emmanuel Macron addressed the armed forces with a formula that startled many observers: "To be free in this world, you must be feared. To be feared, you must be powerful". It was a rare moment in which a liberal head of state spoke the language of raw political realism without the usual cloak of values, institutions, or partnerships. Freedom, Macron insisted, does not derive from treaties or law but from power, and power only secures liberty when it instils fear in others.

The remark resonated far beyond the ritual setting of a presidential address to the army. It condensed in a single sentence two of the most enduring strands of political thought. On the one hand, it echoed Machiavelli's claim that it is safer for a ruler to be feared than loved, and that liberty itself rests not on good intentions but on the ability to wield force. On the other, it reintroduced the Schmittian register of the political, in which conflict, enmity, and the decision to project power cannot be neutralised by legal or institutional design. What might at first appear as an improvised rhetorical flourish instead revealed a conceptual rupture: the return of a vocabulary that modern liberal democracies have spent decades attempting to suppress.

Since the end of the Cold War, European leaders have generally spoken the language of cooperation and integration. Liberal internationalism rests on the belief that law and institutions can replace fear as the foundation of order (see Deudney & Ikenberry, 2021). To suggest that freedom depends on being feared is to puncture that liberal narrative at its core. It amounts to a recognition that security remains tied to coercion, and that sovereignty cannot be guaranteed by norms alone. It implies that military credibility remains indispensable even when liberal institutions appear strongest (see Lawrence Freedman, 2021). Macron's words therefore did more than encourage the military; they repositioned France, and perhaps Europe, within a shifting global order where deterrence and fear have once again become the grammar of politics.

This article situates Macron's declaration within the lineage of political thought and the contemporary strategic environment. It begins by tracing the Machiavellian logic at work in the phrase, showing how the relationship between power, fear, and freedom has been understood since the Renaissance. It then turns to the Schmittian critique of liberalism, examining how Macron's words mark a break with the effort to depoliticise international life. Finally, it situates the statement in the concrete geopolitical context of war in Ukraine, renewed competition with Russia and China, and Europe's struggle to define its strategic autonomy — a theme Macron has pursued since his 2017 Sorbonne speech, and which scholars such as Jolyon Howorth (2019) and Sven Biscop (2018) have developed in academic debate. By reading a single presidential sentence through these lenses, we can better grasp the extent to which liberal neutrality is collapsing under the pressure of renewed conflict, and how classical conceptions of politics are once again reasserting themselves at the heart of European discourse.

The Machiavellian Echo

When Emmanuel Macron declared that freedom requires fear and fear requires power, he was restating in compressed form a claim that has been central to political thought since the Renaissance. Niccolò Machiavelli, writing in the early sixteenth century, confronted the instability of Italian city-states in an environment marked by invasion, faction, and betrayal. In *The Prince* (1513), he famously advised that it is "safer to be feared than loved," since love depends on the fickleness of others while fear endures so long as punishment remains credible. In the

To Be Feared Is to Be Free: Macron's Realist Turn

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Discorsi on Livy (1531), he extended the logic to republics: liberty does not arise from moral virtue alone but from the strength of arms. The freedom of Florence or Rome rested not on eloquent ideals but on the ability to deter adversaries.

Macron's July 2025 formula reproduces this reasoning almost word for word. To be free in a dangerous world, a state must be feared; to be feared, it must command the instruments of coercion. The sequence is circular and self-reinforcing: liberty is the effect of power, and power is meaningful only when it instils fear. In this sense, the French president positioned himself not in the lineage of Enlightenment universalism but in the hard tradition of Renaissance realism. His claim was not about justice or rights but about survival and deterrence.

Machiavelli's insight was that political communities live under permanent insecurity. No order, however carefully designed, can remove the possibility of external threat or internal betrayal. Hence the insistence that *virtù*—energy, decisiveness, the capacity to wield force—matters more than moral goodness. For a prince, as for a republic, the true foundation of liberty lies in preparedness and strength. Macron's words recalled precisely this calculus: in a world of resurgent great-power rivalry, Europe's freedom depends less on the promises of allies or the moral force of its ideals than on the credibility of its arms.

The fact that Macron addressed these words to the French military deepens the Machiavellian resonance. In the *Discorsi*, Machiavelli argued that liberty rests on citizens who bear arms in defence of their polity, rather than on mercenaries or external guarantees. The army is not simply an instrument but the foundation of independence. By reminding French soldiers that their power is what allows France to be feared, and hence free, Macron linked the survival of liberal democracy itself to the classical doctrine of deterrent force. This logic has been visible in practice: France has maintained one of the largest defence budgets in Europe, has pressed for higher collective spending within the EU, and continues to rely on its nuclear deterrent as the ultimate guarantor of sovereignty.

There is, however, a subtle difference worth noting. Machiavelli wrote at a time when the alternative to power was ruin: Italian states that failed to be feared were conquered or subjugated. Macron speaks within a European Union whose official discourse has long emphasised cooperation and law. His phrase thus cuts against the grain of contemporary liberal language. For the president of a leading EU state to invoke the logic of fear is to remind his audience that the security of Europe cannot be grounded solely in treaties, integration, or normative persuasion. Analysts of European security such as Jolyon Howorth (2014) have repeatedly underlined this point: autonomy requires not just institutions but hard power capable of shaping adversaries' calculations.

This echoes a deeper tension in modern statecraft. Liberal democracies often claim that legitimacy rests on attraction rather than coercion, on "soft power" rather than fear. But Machiavelli's lesson, restated by Macron, is that freedom without fear is fragile. A state admired but not feared may still be vulnerable to coercion. In contrast, a state that can command fear protects its space for independent action and shields its liberty from encroachment. Macron's phrase was therefore not a rhetorical flourish but a recognition of the hard truth that admiration alone cannot secure sovereignty.

Machiavelli also warned that rulers who rely exclusively on being feared without avoiding hatred will ultimately destroy themselves. Fear must be managed; it must serve order without collapsing into tyranny. Macron did not elaborate on this tension, but his audience would have understood that the fear he invoked was outwardly directed—toward rival states, not the domestic population. In this sense, his remark sought to anchor France's liberty in deterrence abroad rather than repression at home. The subtlety may have been lost in headlines, but it remains crucial for situating his words in a Machiavellian frame.

By placing fear and power at the foundation of liberty, Macron aligned himself with a long tradition of realist thought that privileges survival over virtue, arms over promises, and deterrence over norms. For a liberal democracy to speak in these terms is striking. It confirms that, beneath the vocabulary of law and values, the core question of politics remains what Machiavelli already knew: how to remain free in a world of hostile powers.

The Schmittian Break

To Be Feared Is to Be Free: Macron's Realist Turn

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If the Machiavellian echo in Macron's statement is obvious, the Schmittian dimension is more unsettling. Liberal democracies pride themselves on speaking the language of law, cooperation, and universal values. They present themselves as arbiters of a world where fear and enmity are progressively dissolved in favour of negotiation, commerce, and integration. To insist that liberty depends on being feared is therefore to rupture the liberal narrative. It reintroduces, in Carl Schmitt's sense, the political as a realm defined by conflict, distinction, and decision.

Schmitt's critique of liberalism was anchored in the belief that modern political theory sought to neutralise antagonism. For him, liberalism was less a doctrine of politics than an effort to displace politics into law, morality, or economics. Liberal thought promised to tame enmity by embedding states in institutions, treaties, and procedures. But Schmitt (2005/1932) argued that such neutralisation was illusory: the friend-enemy distinction could not be abolished, only denied. In moments of crisis, when survival is at stake, the state reveals its sovereignty through the decision to defend itself, regardless of legal or normative constraints.

Macron's July 2025 formulation resonates directly with this insight. To proclaim that freedom rests on fear is to admit that order depends not on law but on the capacity to confront an adversary. Fear presupposes an enemy—someone who must be deterred, compelled, or defeated. This is precisely what liberal discourse has long sought to efface. European integration was built on the claim that war had been "banished" from the continent, that norms and institutions could replace antagonism with rule-based cooperation. By invoking fear as the condition of liberty, Macron re-politicised this framework. He acknowledged that enmity is not an archaic residue but a present reality.

The Schmittian dimension of the remark is further revealed in its implicit recognition of decisionism. Schmitt (2008/1922) defined the sovereign as the one who decides on the exception, who determines when rules no longer apply. Macron's statement contained an echo of this principle: liberty is not secured by adherence to universal rules but by the sovereign decision to wield power in such a way that others are made to fear it. This does not mean Macron was advocating for arbitrary action, but he underscored that the survival of France and Europe cannot rest on the assumption of unbroken rules. Security requires a readiness to act in situations where law may not suffice.

There is a paradox here. Liberal democracies deny the role of fear and enmity in their rhetoric, yet they practise it constantly. NATO's former nuclear doctrine of "deterrence by punishment," the European Union's sanctions regimes against Russia and Iran, and the proliferation of emergency fiscal and security measures during the pandemic all exemplify what Giorgio Agamben (2004) has described as the expansion of exceptional powers under the guise of technical necessity. These are latent exceptions: instruments that acknowledge enmity and rely on coercion while officially presenting themselves as neutral or legalistic. Macron's words punctured this veil. Instead of cloaking deterrence in the vocabulary of law or economics, he stated directly that freedom requires fear, and fear requires power. In so doing, he exposed the hidden political core of liberal practice.

Critics may object that this language risks undermining the normative appeal of liberal democracy. If freedom is secured by fear, what distinguishes democracies from autocracies that likewise rely on coercion? The answer lies in the orientation of fear. As Jan-Werner Müller (2011) has argued in his work on constitutional democracy, liberal systems rest on constraining power internally, a logic that, in practice, often extends outward through deterrence and institutional discipline toward rivals. For democracies, the projection of fear toward external powers creates the conditions for domestic liberty. By contrast, authoritarian regimes often direct fear inward, using coercion to suppress their own citizens. Macron's statement skirted this distinction but implicitly relied on it: the freedom he invoked was the freedom of the French and European polity, preserved through deterrence against external threats.

By speaking in this register, Macron did more than echo Machiavelli. He aligned himself, consciously or not, with Schmitt's insistence that the political cannot be neutralised. The friend-enemy distinction remains, whether acknowledged or denied. Liberalism, in Schmitt's view, is destabilised precisely when it confronts enemies it cannot integrate into its normative order. Russia's war in Ukraine, China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, and the prospect of American retrenchment all exemplify such limits. Macron's declaration thus captured a truth that liberal discourse usually dissimulates: that liberty is contingent, fragile, and dependent on the ability to inspire fear in adversaries who do not share one's norms.

To Be Feared Is to Be Free: Macron's Realist Turn

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The Schmittian break in Macron's speech therefore lies in the starkness of its language. He abandoned the liberal idiom of reassurance and spoke in terms of conflict and coercion. In doing so, he revealed that the veneer of neutralisation is wearing thin, and that European politics is once again governed by the old grammar of power and enmity.

Strategic Context: Macron's France in a Shifting Order

Macron's July 2025 intervention cannot be understood in isolation from the geopolitical environment that prompted it. His assertion that freedom depends on fear, and fear on power, was not a philosophical digression but a response to a transformed security landscape. France, and Europe more broadly, finds itself in an order where deterrence once again defines sovereignty and where the assumption of perpetual peace has collapsed.

The most immediate backdrop is Russia's war in Ukraine. Since February 2022, European security has been restructured around the prospect of sustained confrontation with a revisionist power willing to use force to alter borders. The war revealed the limits of normative persuasion and economic interdependence as instruments of stability. Moscow was neither integrated into the liberal order nor deterred by sanctions and institutional dialogue. Instead, deterrence had to be re-established by military means, with NATO reinforcing its eastern flank and European states accelerating defence spending. Macron's phrase condensed this reality: liberty in Europe no longer rests on the promise of integration but on the fear generated by credible armed power. Ukraine has forced Europe to relearn the centrality of deterrence and coercive credibility in international politics (see Genini, 2025).

A second factor is the uncertainty surrounding the United States. For decades, the American security guarantee allowed European states to underinvest in their own defence while enjoying the benefits of liberal order. That guarantee now appears less reliable. The Trump presidency revealed how easily Washington might retreat from multilateral commitments, and the 2024 US elections have again raised the spectre of a weakened transatlantic bond. Analysts such as Sven Biscop (2019) have argued that this moment of uncertainty should push Europeans to build what Macron has long called "strategic autonomy." His insistence that freedom requires fear was directed as much at European audiences as at adversaries: it was a reminder that only credible European power can ensure liberty in an era of American retrenchment.

China's rise adds a global dimension to this recalibration. The Indo-Pacific has become a zone of competition where France, with its overseas territories in New Caledonia and French Polynesia, as well as a significant naval presence, seeks to project influence (Meijer, 2023). Macron's words apply equally in this theatre: liberty for middle powers depends not on appeals to rules but on the capacity to inspire caution in rivals. France has already participated in joint patrols with Australia, India, and Japan to underline its relevance. To be absent from the calculus of fear is to be irrelevant in strategic terms. His remark therefore tied France's freedom not only to European security but to the broader logic of multipolar rivalry.

Finally, domestic politics also shaped the timing and tone of the address. By speaking to the armed forces on the eve of Bastille Day, Macron connected national sovereignty, military strength, and republican liberty. The message was that France's democracy is safeguarded not merely by constitutional rights but by the soldiers capable of projecting power abroad. This is reinforced by policy: France consistently devotes around 2 percent of its GDP to defence, maintains the EU's only independent nuclear deterrent, and has committed under the 2023 Loi de Programmation Militaire to raise defence spending to €413 billion over 2024–2030. These figures signal that Macron's rhetoric is not detached from material commitments.

The phrase thus crystallised a broader strategic doctrine. France cannot rely solely on alliances, legal frameworks, or the normative appeal of liberal values. It must cultivate the capacity to instill fear in those who would challenge its freedom. This does not necessarily mean aggression; rather, it reflects the logic of deterrence. To be feared is to be taken seriously as a strategic actor, one whose power imposes costs that cannot be ignored.

Seen in this light, Macron's statement was not an aberration but a deliberate repositioning of France within the shifting balance of global politics. It signalled to adversaries that France understands the grammar of power, to allies

To Be Feared Is to Be Free: Macron's Realist Turn

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that Europe must shoulder more responsibility, and to domestic audiences that liberty rests on strength. The Machiavellian and Schmittian registers of the phrase were therefore inseparable from its strategic context: they expressed, in blunt form, the political reality of a world where only power commands freedom.

Conclusion

Macron's declaration to the French army compressed into a single phrase two of the most enduring truths of political thought. It restated the Machiavellian conviction that freedom cannot be secured without the credible projection of power and the fear it generates in rivals. At the same time, it punctured the liberal narrative of neutralisation by acknowledging, in Schmittian terms, that politics is ultimately defined by enmity, coercion, and the sovereign decision to defend one's existence.

The significance of this intervention lies not only in its intellectual genealogy but also in its political timing. In an era of renewed war in Europe, uncertain American guarantees, and expanding multipolar competition, the liberal promise that law and commerce would dissolve antagonism no longer carries conviction. As John Ikenberry has argued, liberal order always depended on the shadow of American power; without that foundation, its normative claims risk becoming hollow. Macron's words recognised that the survival of liberal democracies depends not on their soft-power appeal but on their ability to deter. To be admired may be desirable, but to be feared is indispensable.

This does not mean that France or Europe is abandoning law, values, or institutions. Rather, it signals that these frameworks must rest on a foundation of credible power. Without fear, rules are fragile; without power, liberty is exposed. The analysis of deterrence as the indispensable grammar of security finds a striking political echo here. Macron's statement was thus both a warning and a reminder: beneath the architecture of liberal order lies the elemental truth that sovereignty is preserved by the capacity to instill caution in others.

By bringing Machiavelli and Schmitt back into the language of a liberal democracy, Macron announced more than a rhetorical shift. He marked the exhaustion of a discourse that sought to banish politics from international life, and the reassertion of power as the condition of freedom. The return of fear, far from an aberration, has become once again the grammar of world politics.

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To Be Feared Is to Be Free: Macron's Realist Turn

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Arthur Michelino is a specialist in global operations and risk systems, with a background in international affairs, insurance, and intelligence analysis. His work explores complexity theory, systems thinking, organisational behaviour, and the structural patterns that shape international politics.