

Opinion – Macron's Challenging Vision for Europe in Wartime

Written by Alexander Brotman

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ALEXANDER BROTMAN, MAY 1 2022

Emmanuel Macron's reelection in France is a victory for Europe and for democracy at a time when Europe enters a period of prolonged antagonism with Russia. However, whether Macron's victory ushers in more Europe, or most importantly, more democracy in Europe, remains to be seen. In the West, we should be fortunate to have a strong Franco-German partnership at the present moment, combined with a strong UK that while outside of the EU is committed to European security and is acting as one of Kyiv's closest allies. A Marine Le Pen victory would not have been a death knell for Europe or for France, but it would have marked a downward trend in one of the EU's founding members during one of the greatest crises of European security in recent memory.

While her loss was significant, Le Pen is far from nearing her retirement from French politics, and the record levels of abstention combined with the National Rally's mainstream appeal to young voters, are all cause for concern. Similarly, the desire to remove France from NATO's integrated military command is not a unique position of Le Pen's but one built on the precedent created by President Charles de Gaulle in 1966. In the 2022 presidential election, Le Pen, Jean-Luc Melenchon, and Eric Zemmour were representative of a deep-seated view within French politics of both the far-left and the far-right that sees NATO as American dominated and fundamentally acting against French interests. Macron has long been an advocate for European strategic autonomy, and while he is committed to the NATO alliance, he has no qualms about pressing for European defence capabilities that can operate independently of the United States. Former President Trump accelerated the French, and European view of the dangers of relying too heavily on the United States for their defence, and this trend is set to continue.

Macron is nothing if not ambitious, and his re-election is further validation of his role as a leader not just of France but of Europe. Now, he is Europe's elder statesmen after the departure of German Chancellor Merkel and given the fragile coalition government of Olaf Scholz and the tectonic shifts underway in German politics. He will be able to form like-minded coalitions in Europe with leaders like Mark Rutte of the Netherlands, Mario Draghi of Italy, and Pedro Sanchez of Spain. However, Hungary's Viktor Orban will continue to remain a thorn in his side, and significant opposition to his proposals on European security, including further sanctions on Russia are likely. Macron is dealing with a Europe more ironclad in its conviction to support Ukraine, yet still fragmented on how to co-exist with and wean itself off of a revanchist Russia.

The Baltic states and Poland will be some of Macron's strongest allies in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and will likely advocate for even harsher measures against Putin given their personal histories under Soviet occupation or alignment. As Dr. Benjamin Tallis recently argued in a piece for RUSI, the CEE states occupy the EU's 'new radical centre' and have a taste of the EU's geopolitical power that is more well-defined and pragmatic than that of 'equivocating Western Europeans.' The 'geopolitical idealism' of the CEE states, according to Tallis, can provide a counterweight to the seemingly unattainable notion of strategic autonomy as espoused by Macron, which is built on the premise that the EU is or can become a military power.

Thus, in leading the charge for Europe's future security order, there are many fledgling alliances in which Macron can build upon to help influence and inform his views. In the process, there is the opportunity for a more attainable form of strategic autonomy to emerge that is not led by France but rooted in the historical memories of newer EU member

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states, supported by the EU's founding members, and guided by the pragmatic potential of the EU's collective power.

Macron also clearly sees Russia coming back in from the cold at some point, a view that has rankled some of his partners in the EU. Polish Prime Minister Morawiecki called Macron's dialogue with Putin akin to negotiating with Hitler. Macron responded with a personal attack on Morawiecki and the right-wing Law and Justice Party in Poland, accusing it of being anti-Semitic and anti-LGBT. In dealing with the fallout of the conflict in Ukraine, the personal positions and party ideologies of governments in Central and Eastern Europe will need to be put aside in order to maintain a common front. This is not to say that Poland and Hungary's rule of law battles with the EU should not be vigorously prosecuted, as is currently the case with the rule of law procedure triggered against Hungary. However, the implementation of formal mechanisms to ensure the rule of law in individual member states should not hinder the EU's fight against the principal adversary that threatens the security of the entire bloc.

Prior to the conflict in Ukraine, in an interview with *The Economist* in 2019, Macron famously derided NATO as 'brain dead' at a time when President Trump was casting serious doubts about the viability and even existence of the alliance. As he embarks on his second five-year term in office, NATO is likely to enlarge to two new members in Finland and Sweden, with an increase in defence spending to the notable 2% of GDP threshold in Germany amid Scholz's announcement of *Zeitenwende*, or a turning point based on rearmament. Now, NATO is far from brain dead and has been given a 'strategic clarification' as a result of Moscow's actions, according to Macron. To ensure that NATO's brain death doesn't re-emerge, its foundations and purpose will have to be solidified if it is to contend with a return of President Trump in 2024 or a France led by either Marine Le Pen or a far-left candidate in 2027.

While Macron's victory is impressive and reassuring, his vision for Europe is far from assured. Likewise, the forces of populism are far from neutered and will need to be addressed by leaders of both the right and the left on both sides of the Atlantic. For Macron to succeed, he will likely need to deliver tangible results for French citizens and engage first with France in order to engage with Europe. Few European leaders possess the foresight and strategic thinking on long-term issues facing Europe as Macron does, and this is his greatest asset. His second term would be wise not to sacrifice that commitment to Europe at the expense of French voters who may increasingly not feel like stakeholders to Macron's vision, only leading to further disenchantment at the next election.

The author is writing in my personal capacity and not through any professional affiliation.

About the author:

Alexander Brotman is a political risk and intelligence analyst with a focus on EU politics and security developments. He has written for several political risk publications, including *Global Risk Insights*, *Foreign Brief*, and *Geopolitical Monitor*, and has provided direct research support to a leading scholar of Russia and Eurasia in Washington. Alexander received his MSc. in International Relations from The University of Edinburgh. He is currently based in Washington DC.

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