

Europe Is at a Crossroads Thirty Years After the Fall of the Berlin Wall



President Trump and President Macron during their talks in New York, September 24, 2018
Official White House photo by Shealah Craighead

President Macron has decided to rapidly move closer to Russia amidst heightening concerns over “America First” Policies. His decision is based on the “great game” being played out, namely US-China competition and increased cooperation between China and Russia.

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At the commemoration ceremony of the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall on November 19, 2019, German Chancellor Minister Angela Merkel and other prime ministers of former Eastern European states gathered and laid flowers by the remains of the Wall. Thirty years have passed since the end of the Cold War, so has the world truly overcome the “Cold War” and entered a new age?

It is true that that ideological conflict is no longer so pronounced, but we have not overcome the framework of great power antagonism. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, I argued that a schema of conflict between unilateral action and multilateral cooperation in a



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multipolar context would persist for a further quarter century or more, and we have indeed seen the world transform into a multipolar system that takes the shape of Eurasian countries fighting over spheres of influence centering on an axis of US-China relations. Immediately after his inauguration, the late Jacques Chirac, the former French President, pointed out the post-Cold War multipolar system and opposed the subsequent Iraq War. Now, Europe once again has to define its international role on the global stage. Can the position of France's President Emmanuel Macron, who sharply criticizes the present state of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and tries to approach Russia, actually be framed as one such attempt.

The Impact of the “Brain Death of NATO” Remark

In an interview with *The Economist* on November 7, President Macron commented critically on the “brain death of NATO.” The direct background of the remark was President Trump's decision to withdraw US troops from Syria. That was part of Trump's campaign strategy for the 2016 presidential election, which entails starting to lower the evaluation criteria for the president's policies over the preceding three years. Trump had pledged in his election campaign to “withdraw from Syria.”

Trump's decision was certainly in line with “America First” and, as expected, it led to Turkish military intervention immediately after and would likely have led to a tragedy for the Kurds living in northeast Syria, but because Russia swiftly sent troops, a catastrophe was averted thanks to President Putin's intervention. The arbitrary actions of the United States are destabilizing trust between the United States and Europe. President Macron pointed out that the very collective defense system of Article 5 of NATO is facing a crisis, asserting that NATO is not functioning due to the “instability of our American partner.” It was an expression of the European member states' distrust of Trump's diplomacy, including the pressure on NATO member states to increase defense spending, the threat of a withdrawal of US troops from Europe, the termination of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and the withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Agreement. The gist of Macron's remark was that there exists a need for Europe to quickly develop its own defense arrangement.

By contrast, Chancellor Merkel criticized Macron's remark as “radical” and objected that “NATO is in the national interest of Germany.” The United Kingdom, a key defense partner of France, was unhappy with such action by France and warned that such an approach would cause a rift in the bond between the European member states.

In what light ought we to see President Macron's remark? Although there are nuances, the countries actually all have in common that they are distrustful of the Trump diplomacy. Right after the election of President Trump became known in November 2016, the most vehement reaction came from Chancellor Merkel. She strongly asserted the need for Europe to establish their own independent defense policy. German projection in the defense sphere has been taboo ever since the Cold War era, so that moment was a new step forward. Subsequently, a well-known German think-tank even went as far as debating and defining “What is (diplomatic) autonomy?”

In that sense, the principal countries of Europe and the EU are in general agreement about the need for a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and common defense policy (defense integration). The EU announced the “Solana Paper,” a strategic document, for the first time in 2003, but it was versioned up to “A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy” in 2016 as the EU started asserting its “strategic autonomy” in a multipolar world. This can also be seen in how the newly inaugurated President Macron advocated the creation of a common military force for Europe in August 2017.

However, Macron’s assertion was not particularly new. Advocacy of European defense integration centering on France and recognition of French nuclear weapons as “European nuclear weapons” have been basic stances of successive French governments.

So what was President Macron trying to achieve? Before the German federal election forecasts had been certain of the stable continuation of the Merkel Administration after the election. In other words, Macron’s aim was to open up the possibility for German–French defense cooperation and take his own initiative in this area. There were some scholars who promoted Macron’s proposal as a major turning point for the EU, but it would be misleading to consider his advocacy an innovation in itself. What matters is its timing and realization.



Signing of the joint notification on the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), November 13, 2017 Tauno Tölk (EU2017EE) via Flickr, CC BY 2.0 <https://www.flickr.com/people/145047505@N06>

Nevertheless, in the end, things did not go according to plan. The German conservatives failed to get a majority and German politics came to a standstill for more than half a year, after which it became clear that Chancellor Merkel’s unifying force had deteriorated both at home and abroad. It was at such a time that the Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was founded in December 2017, but many uncertainties remain when it comes to how much the principal countries can

actually agree on this organization very much established under French leadership.

In that sense, Macron is worried by “Brexit” and domestic political unrest in other countries due to populism. This is because the integration of independent European defense remains at a standstill. As the NATO Leaders Meeting was coming up just then in December 2019, he wanted to take the initiative as he had done in the summer of 2017. I suspect the true significance of Macron’s NATO criticism lies here, and what worries the United Kingdom and Germany is the impatience of young Macron.

President Macron Rapidly Moving Closer to Russia

So what is the range of the European defense envisioned by President Macron? The key is Russia.

Recently, President Macron has rapidly been moving closer to Russia. On September 9, 2019, the Russian–French Security Cooperation Council in the “2+2” format was held in Moscow for the first time in fifteen years. It was established in the 1990s in expectation of Russian democratization, but was suspended after the Ukraine crisis in 2014.

President Macron initially was not assertive about a policy of approaching Russia. At the end of May 2017, right after his presidential inauguration, when he welcomed President Putin at the Versailles Palace for an exhibition called “Peter the Great: A Tsar in France, 1717,” President Macron acted as host but was also vehemently critical of Russian diplomacy in Putin’s presence. The slandering of candidate Macron during the presidential election campaign, the interference in domestic politics through cyber-attacks, and Russian “hybrid warfare” during the Ukraine crisis were all etched on Macron’s mind.

However, President Macron gradually softened his stance on Russia when faced with the diplomacy of the self-righteous Trump Administration, so at a meeting in Saint Petersburg in May 2018, Macron started signaling a pro-Russian stance. President Putin’s response was initially cool, but at the World War I Armistice Day 100th Anniversary Ceremony on November 11, Putin presented a flower bouquet and attended a forum hosted by Macron, despite not being a speaker himself. After that, in the spring following the subsiding of the “Yellow vests movement” that started in the fall of 2018, Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a former Defence Minister and former left-wing leader in the Socialist Party, delivered an official letter to President Putin, recommending the policy of moving closer to Russia. Furthermore, Macron made efforts to invite President Putin to the G7 and supported the reinstatement of Russia in the European Council in July.

“Common European Home” of Unrequited Love as Depicted by a “Russian–French Alliance”

Ahead of the G7 in Osaka in late August 2019, Macron invited Putin to his summer residence the Fort de Brégançon, where they talked for five hours. His reason for making a fresh attempt at bringing France and Russia together at that time was the start of prisoner exchanges between Russia and Ukraine. However, Macron’s intention to recommence his policy to approach Russia

and his French–Russian diplomacy was already made clear on August 27, 2018 in a statement he made about a new European security organization at the Conference of Ambassadors at the Élysée Palace. President Macron went on for some time, saying that “I already mentioned [...] the framework of a European security and defence architecture; but we cannot build Europe on a long-term basis without thinking about our relation to Russia [...]”

It goes without saying that the idea of this “framework of a European security and defence architecture” closely resembles the “Common European Home” proposed by President Gorbachev in the 1980s. It also matches the slogan of a Europe “from the Atlantic to the Urals” that was advocated by Charles de Gaulle. Among the countries in Western Europe, France has a particularly close historical relationship with Russia. The breakthrough for France when it was isolated by Otto von Bismarck’s encirclement at the end of the nineteenth century was the Franco–Russian Alliance of 1894. Also during the Cold War, President de Gaulle conducted a diplomacy of equidistance between the United States and the Soviet Union, while President Mitterrand quickly visited the Soviet Union “to mediate the restoration of East–West relations” right after the Euromissile Crisis had calmed down with the deployment of US-made INF in Western Europe.

However, there is nothing certain about “Eurasian peace” spearheaded by a Franco–Russian “Alliance.” Despite Macron’s advances to Russia, the crucial situation in Ukraine is not settling down. A summit meeting following the Normandy Format (Germany, Russia, Ukraine and France), including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Chancellor Merkel, that was planned for the end of September 2019 remains on hold. This is because no solution is in sight for the conflict in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine and the concerns about the prospects of the planned election process.

I visited Moscow in September 2019 as a part of a project for exchange between experts, and found those at the Institute of Europe to be very calm in their views on French–Russian rapprochement. Since such attempts have been made in the past as well, expectations are not so great in Russia about moving closer to France. By contrast, even staff at the French foreign ministry were initially surprised by Macron’s proposal for a “common security organization” in August 2018, and there was a growing distrust of the president. This was because Macron’s proposal lacked clarity and specificity.

The Eurasian Great Game and a Wedge in Chinese–Russian Rapprochement

So what is the background of Macron’s pro-Russian policy? It is the shadow China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Chinese–Russian rapprochement. Already last year, Chinese–Russian trade exceeded one hundred million dollars, making China Russia’s biggest trading partner. At the 70th anniversary of the establishment of China–Russia diplomatic relations in Saint Petersburg in June 2019, Xi called Putin one of his “closest friends and a great colleague” and praised relations between the two countries as being on an “unprecedentedly high level.” Several big contracts for infrastructure, 5G, and so forth were also concluded.

After that, bilateral military cooperation between China and Russia developed at a rapid pace.

From April to May 2019, the “Joint Sea-2019” exercise on the sea off Qingdao, east China’s Shandong Province, was held by the Chinese and Russian navies. This was a regular exercise conducted since 2012, held in the East China Sea in 2014 and in the South China Sea in 2016. On September 16, the Russian army conducted a major military exercise called the “Tsentr-2019 (Center-2019)” together with the Chinese army in the Orenburg region of south Russia. Since the military exercise “Vostok-2018 (East-2018),” which was conducted in the Far East and Siberia last year, military exercises involving the two countries have been conducted in two successive years. Both had the aim of containing the United States, and as is well-known, they conducted “joint surveillance activities (Chinese–Russian joint bomber patrol flights)” over the Japan Sea and the East Asia Sea for the first time in July. The “Russian National Security Strategy” in 2015 identified the relationship with China as “a foundation for global and regional stability.” This growing amicability between China and Russia is intended to rehabilitate the Russian diplomacy that was isolated due to the Ukraine conflict.

In recognition of Macron’s pro-Russian diplomacy, Hubert Védrine, whose authority has been established since his time as foreign minister under Mitterrand, commented that “It is important to build a realistic relationship with Russia. It is to prevent Russia from heading to China. [...] That is a composed calculation in the name of pragmatism and not ideology.” That would mean that President Macron’s pro-Russia policy is level-headed realism.

However, France’s exceptional relationship with Russia has also invited public criticism within the EU. While it agrees with the principle of “European strategic autonomy (ESA),” the Russian policy also shows that concrete cooperation is not easy. The understanding and cooperation of the EU member states is needed, but they have reacted in a variety of ways to France’s rapprochement with Russia. The bewilderment around the EU headquarters in Brussels cannot be concealed. Macron’s policy is France’s traditional diplomacy of equality and not official EU policy, while the relationship between the EU and Russia has not formally improved since the Ukraine conflict, so the reality is suspicions that Putin’s aim is to destabilize the EU.

Also this issue has led to disagreement between France and Germany. At this point, the discord between France and Germany has become grave. Germany was very dissatisfied also this time around when President Macron did not provide any prior discussion. A growing gap between France and Germany at a time when no solution to the Ukraine issue is in sight is in no way desirable for the EU. Germany is increasingly wary that this is the precise aim of Putin’s diplomacy.

Additionally, the Eastern European countries that have historically tasted the bitterness of the Russian threat can do nothing but worry about Macron moving closer to Russia. Particularly in Poland where there is a tendency toward Atlanticism and pro-Americanism, the Russian power diplomacy against Georgia, Ukraine and Crimea revives historical memories of Hitler’s annexation of Czechoslovakia and Austria. The Second World War was a result of the Western European countries’ appeasement policy as they did not resist Nazi German aggression.

However, by contrast, Finland, which has twice fought against their neighbor the Soviet Union and gone through similar bitter experiences, rather welcomes Macron’s open door to Russia. Another country that resonates with Macron in Western Europe is Italy. Federica Mogherini,

former High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, said in September 2019 that moving closer to Russia will be a precautionary measure to avoid European isolation.

Thirty years after the end of the Cold War, Europe is trying to clarify the direction of its “Strategic Autonomy,” but that is simultaneously a measure in response to the fluid situation in Eurasia, including the shift in American diplomacy and the emergence of China. It is a survival game amid fighting over spheres of influence in a multipolar world. How can an active and independent strategy for survival be constructed along with the diplomatic foundation for realizing it? This is not just Europe’s problem. It is a worldwide problem.

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