



Macron's unilateral attack on NATO could backfire

By Paola Del Bigio

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Mr Macron's recent blunt criticism of NATO and his imperious vision of the EU go hand in hand. Since taking office in May 2017, the French President has been advocating for the EU to enhance its cooperation on defence and security and for more fiscal integration to enhance the Eurozone bloc's powers. Surely, this is what the EU would be in need for. But playing an active role on the international scene and being effective in delivering results is not the same, if not premature. Undoubtedly, his vision of the EU is a remarkably French one - the idea underpinning its unrequited geopolitical ambitions is that France's interests would be better served by the combined economic weight of the Union, acting as a counterweight to the great power blocs that shape global affairs, notably the US, China and Russia.

By lately positioning himself at the centre of noteworthy diplomatic efforts - taking the lead role in efforts to salvage the Iran nuclear deal, or by outreaching to President Putin to engage Russia as a strategic partner, Mr Macron has effectively been trying to position France as a "balancing power" on the international scene, by reviving its global clout on multiple fronts, and by putting forward France's vision of a more geopolitical EU posture. However, both gambles have so far failed. The Iran deal, amongst others, because France and Europe have been powerless to offer meaningful guarantees to broker any political deal with the US and Teheran. The attempt to contain Russia, by outreaching to President Putin, was no actual success either. Russia's strained relations with the EU have turned out not to be a central issue in determining Russia's feared relations with China. Rather, it should be attributed to attempts to weaken the US and its

global reach, at a time when the EU cannot afford an open confrontation with Russia and is facing challenges from China. As European sanctions for Russia's annexation of Crimea have so far proved ineffective, Mr Macron would have effectively been thinking of a rapprochement with Moscow also to capitalise nationally in terms of its lucrative energy sector.

Mr Macron's recent actions - the result of no prior consultation with his EU partners, have so far alienated EU member states, especially Eastern European countries, who have a different perception of the Russian threat and are anxious to preserve US security guarantees. Latvian President Vike-Freiberga, who oversaw the country's accession to the EU and NATO, commented "We are uncomfortable when we are told that France and Germany will ensure the defence of Europe ... We have the impression the big countries will decide for the rest of us and we will have to follow ... The French still have a lot of work to do to get their ideas accepted by their partners". Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also called these proposals "dangerous".

By attacking the rational foundation for NATO's existence in his recent interview for *The Economist*, Mr Macron has effectively set the scene for a vibrant debate on the future of the organization, due to take place in London on the 1-2 December, to mark the alliance's 70th anniversary. So far, in a move to try and ease the tensions ahead of the meeting, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas has come forward with a proposal on how to further strengthen NATO and the transatlantic bond by appointing an expert group ahead of the leaders' summit.



Brexit and Mrs Merkel's decision not to seek a fifth term as a Chancellor, after having dominated European politics since 2005, have created the circumstances for Mr Macron to engineer himself as the centre of European defence and foreign policy making. He has often noted that after the UK's exit from the EU, France "will be the EU's only nuclear power with the only permanent seat on the UN Security Council", and that "the EU must equip ourselves with ...the grammar of power and sovereignty" following what he sees as collapse of a US-EU strategic cooperation within the alliance, and therefore ... "reassess the reality of what NATO is, in the light of the commitment of the US".

Mr Macron's dedication to an EU army has been evident in France's leading role in 10 of the 13 initiatives approved by the EU defence ministers recently. However, despite having launched 33 civil and military missions outside their borders since 2013, the build-up of agencies, programmes and committees have not yet added up to an independent European defence, and the US forces' withdrawal from Syria made France's inability to act on its own painfully obvious, despite Mr Macron's commenting "France is present overseas on every continent ... We have an unparalleled reach", (Interview with the Economist).

It is too early to tell if Mr Macron's scathing analysis of the dangers he sees facing NATO and Europe will effectively reach widespread recognition, or be interpreted as an appearance of a French power grab. For Germany's defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, "NATO remains a decisive cornerstone", commenting that "France has a different military culture than Germany ... and that (France) was seeking more strategic autonomy and a strong European cooperation to replace NATO... whereas Germany is more concerned about the "ability to act" and should aim to provide 10% of all military capabilities at NATO's disposal by 2031". "Any strengthening of European defense also strengthens NATO", she commented.

Undoubtedly the EU will have to forge ahead and start taking care of its own defence, as it lacks military capabilities and a shared strategic culture.

But it does not have to be in competition with NATO, nor weaken the bonds with the US; it would not be able to do so even if it wanted to. As the US Ambassador to NATO Kay Bailey Hutchinson remarked, by questioning Mr Macron's rationality: "America brings the leadership of NATO. We are stronger together. We have the capacity to lead. We do our part and more, and we share what we do. I don't think Europe would be as safe without the transatlantic bond that we have and that's why the bond was formed in the first place". The US Ambassador further warned EU leaders against thinking that they could manage global security threats on their own, by adding "NATO is absolutely essential if we are going to assess the risks that we face altogether and the thought of only one of our countries, our one of our groups of countries, facing the enormous risks to our populations alone, is not even rational".

Mr Macron's underlying message, is that Europe needs to start acting as a strategic power, by regaining its military sovereignty, and act not only as an economic bloc based on market growth. To this end, Mr Macron has spent the last two years pushing for more integration of the EU, albeit with little results. In effect, Mrs Merkel has shown no interest in how the EU should develop and has privileged Germany's national interests, often at the expense of the EU Commission, the EU's executive arm. It is therefore very difficult to understand, in actual fact, how the French President's proposals could be implemented and what sense of direction the EU should take in order to defend its political and economic system, and respond strategically to future challenges. As Mr Macron's recent unilateral diplomatic activity demonstrates, either towards blocking EU enlargement in the Western Balkans or by trying to engineer direct talks between the US and Iran, the EU's lack of ambition for a more integrated Europe has resulted in not having been able to act in unison and not responding adequately to the geostrategic shifts taking place across the globe. Presently, it would hardly be prepared to deal with any major international crisis for lack of strategic depth and cohesion.



NATO is definitely facing new challenges that were very hard to predict when it was first conceived. However, strong support of NATO, a truly united western alliance with strong bonds with the US, are fundamental to the collective interests of all of the Western allies, and should incorporate full blown defence links, integrated command structures and shared strategic planning. Realistically, European hard power can only be expressed through NATO, as reiterated by Mr Stoltenberg, NATO's General Secretary, " We are the only platform where North America and Europe sits together, decides together and do things together on important security issues". This may not be what France is aiming for in a post- Brexit era, as it has long harboured to wield more influence in security matters since its reintegration in NATO during Mr Sarkozy's Presidency. Interestingly, the French President is now in support of a NATO functioning as much as a political alliance as a military one, an approach which has historically always been rejected by French leaders. By also launching new EU defence initiatives, Mr Macron is effectively in-keeping with a long - standing tradition among French foreign policy elites. In this sense, the next NATO conference will either reflect new realities or illustrate the obstacles and limits of Mr Macron's ambitions.