

At the Elysée Palace

Emmanuel Macron on how to rescue Europe

The French president on grave risks to the continent, and what to do about them



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Seven years ago, when Emmanuel Macron was first elected president of France, it was with a campaign infused with optimism about Europe. The leader who sat down with *The Economist* on April 29th is an altogether graver figure. He has lost none of his combative energy. But his analysis of the threats encircling Europe is resolutely bleak. At stake is the survival of Europe as a safe place, a guarantor of prosperity and the liberal democratic order. “A civilisation can die,” Mr Macron warns, and the end can be “brutal”. “Things can happen much more quickly than we think.”

Mr Macron is speaking just days after giving a [speech](#) at the Sorbonne in which he first said that “our Europe can die”. In our interview, conducted in the first-floor *salon doré* of the Elysée Palace, the French windows thrown open to the broad lawns below, the president stresses far more starkly the urgency and gravity of the moment. His worry concerns not just the European Union, or even the defence of European territory. It is about the durability of a set of rules and values, underpinned by economic wealth and physical security, which bind all Europeans.

Mr Macron identifies a triple shock of interconnected threats which create a particularly dangerous moment in the continent’s history. The first is geopolitical: Europe’s struggle to stand up to Vladimir Putin’s Russia, even as America’s future commitment to Europe has gone wobbly. Having once worried out loud about not “humiliating” Moscow, Mr Macron has turned into one of Europe’s most [outspoken](#) hawks. Listing the record of Russian belligerence, from its threat to use nuclear weapons to its relentless use of hybrid warfare and disinformation, regional troublemaking, and aggression in space and at sea, the president has no doubt about what is at stake. “If Russia wins in Ukraine there will be no security in Europe,” he says. “Who can pretend that Russia will stop there?” What security would there be, he asks, for neighbouring countries: Moldova, Romania, Poland, Lithuania and others?

To stand up to Russia in the short run, Mr Macron recalls, European and nato leaders who met in Paris on February 26th agreed on new steps, including the reinforcement of Moldova’s borders. France now co-runs with America a coalition to source artillery for Ukraine; Mr Macron says he will make fresh deliveries before the summer. France has signed a ten-year bilateral security deal with Ukraine, worth €3bn (\$3.2bn) in 2024.

Mr Macron also stands by his refusal to rule out putting boots on the ground in Ukraine. His comments prompted disbelief and anger in Germany, and a blistering riposte from Olaf Scholz, the chancellor. Yet the French president argues that, faced with an expansionist Russia, Europe’s ability to deter further aggression rests on not defining red lines. He calls this “the basic condition” of its security and credibility. These were not

empty words, he insists. “If the Russians were to break through the front lines, if there were a Ukrainian request, which is not the case today,” he says, “we would legitimately have to ask ourselves this question.” France, he notes, sent its troops to help African countries in the Sahel when their leaders asked.

To shore up Europe in the longer run, Mr Macron is hatching ideas for a new binding European security “framework”. This instantly raises the hackles of many European Atlanticists, who distrust France’s motives, suspecting it is out to undermine nato and use grand visions to prop up its own defence firms. In an interview in 2019 with *The Economist*, Mr Macron spoke of the “[brain death](#)” of nato. Today, though, he insists “there is no question of brushing nato aside”.

In his telling, America simply will not always have Europe’s back. The continent has no choice: “We have to get ready to protect ourselves.” He wants to make a start at a summit in July at Britain’s Blenheim Palace. This gathering of the European Political Community, a Macron brainchild, brings together eu and non-eu members. The president wants attendees to identify the security risks facing Europe, the military capabilities it needs, and how to make more kit on European soil. Mr Macron will put on the table a full discussion of how France’s nuclear deterrent (which, unlike Britain’s, is wholly home-built and not “assigned” to nato) could contribute further to European security. He wants to finalise this discussion “in the coming months”. Mr Macron also wants to reinforce bilateral defence co-operation with the hosts, post-Brexit Britain, building on the Lancaster House treaties.

All of this is arresting not least because it reflects a decidedly un-French willingness to think outside the eu box about how Europeans might forge agreements based on “multiple geography”. Europe’s future security is an “existential debate”, Mr Macron declares, which “is not reduced to the European Union... The framework isn’t institutional, it’s geographical.” Previous French leaders conceived of European defence as an eu project, which used to spook the British. Charles de Gaulle jealously guarded France’s sovereignty, and first developed its autonomous nuclear deterrent. Indeed the inheritors of the Gaullist right today, the Republicans party, accuse Mr Macron of jeopardising this with his nuclear offer—although, as the president stresses, he is not offering to surrender operational control.

The second risk to Europe comes from the twin economic shock of accelerating technology and China. Mr Macron, a former investment banker, worries that Europe is about to fall behind in crucial high-tech sectors, from clean tech to quantum computing, if it does not grasp the scale and urgency of what needs to be done now. Part of his solution would involve a large injection of public money, in good old *dirigiste* fashion. Part of it would also be about deregulation, to encourage risk and disruptive innovation.

China’s president, Xi Jinping, will visit France from May 6th-7th, stopping by in the Pyrenees, where Mr Macron spent childhood holidays with his grandmother. The French president hopes to keep China engaged in the fight against climate change, as well as to urge Mr Xi to exert pressure on Russia. But Mr Macron will also give his guest a tough message about the need to protect both Europe’s producers (notably from an influx of Chinese electric vehicles) and its strategic security.

Underpinning this analysis is the observation that nobody else plays by the rules any more. The old order has been broken. Nothing has yet replaced it. America, in Mr Macron’s account, thought it would discipline Chinese behaviour with international trade rules. Instead America has ended up massively subsidising its own industry, just like the Chinese. Europe, he insists, is not being protectionist but realist when it seeks to do the same. Moreover, if Europeans are to build the industrial scale needed to stay competitive, he warns, they have to accept that specialisation cannot mean a “fair” share of subsidies for all countries or industries.

The final threat to Europe is democratic: a resurgent nationalism, turbo-charged by disinformation and echo-chamber news. The best way to understand the risk today, Mr Macron suggests, is to re-read Marc Bloch, a French historian executed by the Gestapo. In “Strange Defeat”, Bloch argued that the elites facilitated the fall of France to the Nazis in 1940 through short-sightedness and complacency. “What kills me, in France as in Europe, is the spirit of defeat,” declares the president. “The spirit of defeat means two things: you get used to it and you stop fighting.” This is the danger: elites are starting to assume that opinion polls make an outcome inevitable, and then to resign themselves to it. “Politics isn’t about reading polls,” he says; “it’s a fight, it’s about ideas, it’s about convictions.”

As always with Mr Macron there is something in all of this to dazzle and to dismay. Germany will close its ears to his appeals for a bigger eu budget. Europeans wedded to the American security umbrella dislike anything that looks as if it might hasten its demise. The eu's institutional leaders will resist any threat to their own power structures. Even if there were agreement on objectives, turning such a sweeping set of ideas into reality stretches the limits of ambition. Mr Macron has managed to shift the conversation in Europe on some matters, such as the issuing of common debt or the promise to enlarge the eu to Ukraine and Moldova. But his weakness has often been the building of alliances, above all at a time when the Franco-German tie is so strained.

Difficulty or risk, however, has seldom deterred the 46-year-old Mr Macron. As he has often said, had he listened to those who counselled caution, he would not be where he is today. Despite the darkness of the president's analysis, his spirit seems, remarkably, to have survived the turbulence of office. Mr Macron cannot run for a third consecutive term in 2027. This leaves him three years to shore up his legacy. His latest wake-up call may be an attempt to stir both fellow Europeans, and those seeking to fend off nationalists and succeed him in the broad centre at home. ■