

From Munich to Paris

The nightmare of a Trump-Putin deal leaves Europe in shock

At an emergency meeting in Paris there are splits on sending troops to Ukraine



Photograph: ROPI

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EUROPEAN LEADERS filed into the Elysée Palace on February 17th in bright sunshine, and sombre mood. They were still reeling from the message conveyed at the weekend by members of Donald Trump’s administration: that Europeans have no place at [peace talks](#) between America and Russia over Ukraine and that “stark strategic realities prevent the United States of America from being primarily focused on the security of Europe,” as the defence secretary, Pete Hegseth, put it. Before the hastily called meeting Sir Keir Starmer, Britain’s prime minister, called it a “generational challenge” for the continent.

But it was not clear by the end of the gathering, organised by Emmanuel Macron, France’s president, if Europe’s leaders were genuinely any readier to meet the challenge. They are certainly no closer to securing a place at talks between America and Russia over [Ukraine](#). Delegations from each of those two countries, led by Marco Rubio, America’s secretary of state, and Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister, are due to meet on February 18th in Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. Neither Europeans nor the Ukrainians have been invited.

Nor did the Europeans show any signs of agreement in Paris on a plan to dispatch forces to Ukraine, if there is a peace deal with Russia that is acceptable to Kyiv. Mr Macron first floated the idea of putting boots on the ground last year, and has been trying to rally fellow Europeans to it. Sir Keir has now promised to send British troops as part of such a force, but a day after he said that, he made clear in Paris that any force would need to be underwritten by America, stating “there must be a US backstop, because a US security guarantee is the only way to effectively deter Russia from attacking Ukraine again.” On the same day Donald Tusk, Poland’s prime minister, ruled out sending troops. Just ahead of the meeting Spain said it was “too early” to discuss troops on the ground. Germany, just days from its own federal election on February 23rd, is also wary. Speaking in Paris Olaf Scholz, the German chancellor, insisted that there can be “no division of security” between Europe and America; he was “irritated”, he said, that the question of sending forces was being raised before there was any peace.

To general surprise Mr Scholz, however, was more forthcoming on the question of debt-financed defence spending. If European countries spent anything over 2% of GDP on defence, the current NATO target, said the chancellor, Germany would be “favourable” to the idea of not taking that amount into budget-deficit calculations. (The European Union currently caps government deficits at 3%.) Mr Scholz also hinted that Germany might be open to joint debt-financed defence spending, something that Friedrich Merz, his probable successor, has also not definitively ruled out. If it happens, this could enable Europe to spend far greater sums

on boosting its defence capabilities. Mr Tusk, whose country spends more on defence as a share of GDP than any other represented at the meeting, has been particularly vocal in urging his fellow leaders to follow suit.

If European leaders left Paris without detailed agreement on any of these matters, there was nonetheless one source of encouragement for some participants: the format of the meeting itself, a manageable gathering of the principal players that may now be able to drive progress. In the past many European leaders, from those of Britain to the Baltics, have been distrustful of Mr Macron's long-standing discourse on forging common European defence, suspecting him of seeking to undermine the transatlantic alliance, boost his country's defence industry, or both. Now Mr Trump has rendered such talk both acceptable and urgent.

Not all Europeans were happy with Mr Macron's mini-summit. Giorgia Meloni, Italy's prime minister, was reportedly cross at the exclusion of smaller countries, not least because the format draws attention to Italy's (and Spain's) poor performance on defence. Viktor Orban, Hungary's leader, unsurprisingly, called it a "meeting of losers". But the inclusion of both British and NATO leaders helped to dispel a greater worry. "All the participants at this meeting realise that the transatlantic relationship," said Mr Tusk after the meeting, has "entered a new phase." Sir Keir, head of a country that quit the EU, even referred to "what we do as Europeans". The summit has helped to bring Britain closer to the rest of Europe, on this point at least. But that may be meagre compensation for the looming prospect of a split in the transatlantic alliance. ■