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Back from the brink? Has Emmanuel Macron managed to reason with Donald Trump?

And keep America from abandoning Ukraine



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FACED WITH a collapsing transatlantic alliance, stunned European leaders this week began a diplomatic effort to salvage what is left of it, and try to bring [Donald Trump](#) back from the brink over [Ukraine](#). On February 24th Emmanuel Macron, the French president, dashed to Washington three days before Sir Keir Starmer, Britain's prime minister, was due to make his own visit. Mr Macron spent three hours with the American president, claiming afterwards that the talks had resulted in "substantive steps" forward.

The two presidents' starting points could scarcely be more different. Mr Macron, along with fellow European leaders, considers Ukraine's security in the face of Russian expansionism to be paramount. "Peace", the French president said, standing in the White House alongside his American host, "must not mean a surrender of Ukraine." For his part Mr Trump has called Volodymyr Zelensky, Ukraine's president, a "dictator", and last week organised direct talks with the Russians that cut out Mr Zelensky and Europeans. Sitting beside the French president, Mr Trump pointedly declined to call Vladimir Putin a dictator, saying "I don't use those words lightly."

Mr Macron seemed cautiously upbeat about his visit to the White House. One reason is that, in his telling, Mr Trump agreed to some form of American "backing" for any possible future deployment of European forces to help keep the peace in Ukraine. Exactly what this might mean was ambiguous. But Mr Macron went as far as calling it a "turning point"; Mr Trump did not correct his guest.

For several weeks France and Britain have been discussing ways to form a coalition of European and allied peacekeeping forces that could be dispatched in the event of a peace deal that is acceptable to Ukraine. This would form part of a European security guarantee against future Russian aggression, but could only be credible with American military and intelligence support. Perhaps this is something that Mr Trump might contemplate, particularly if tied to the critical-minerals deal he is hoping to strike with Ukraine.

The second reason is that Mr Trump now suggests that Mr Putin, contrary to his public comments, would not object to European peacekeepers on the ground in Ukraine. "He will accept that. I've asked him that question," the American president said before his talks with Mr Macron. The French president stressed that any European troops would not be sent to the front line, nor directly into combat. Such a force, though, would be necessary to offer "reassurance" to Ukraine and to ensure that "peace is respected". It would be part of Europe's effort to spend more to defend itself.

It is too early to tell whether the small steps forward that Mr Macron claims to have made will prove meaningful. Mr Trump's word is worth what it is worth. The American president spoke with relative restraint during his press conference with Mr Macron, complementing his French counterpart; Mr Macron made sure to

thank and flatter his host. Yet *earlier the same day, to the consternation of its allies, America voted with Russia against a UN resolution that condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine.*

As Europeans scramble to respond to the upending of the post-war security order on their continent, they do at last seem to be taking the gravity of the situation seriously. Previously partial to unilateral diplomacy, Mr Macron this time spoke to 30 European and allied leaders ahead of his visit to Washington and has worked closely on security plans with Britain. *“Even if the idea of American backing for a European peacekeeping force is only implicit,” says Mujtaba Rahman, managing director for Europe at Eurasia Group, a risk consultancy, “Macron has been able to edge the conversation forward in quite a productive way.”* Mr Starmer's visit will be the next test of whether there is more to this than talk. ■