



By: The Editorial Board

Macron's Strategic Autonomy for Europe is turning into a strategic risk



The President of France, Emmanuel Macron, was satisfied and self-confident when he told reporters during the flight between Beijing and Guangzhou on the state-owned Airbus, that Europeans should not interfere in the crisis over Taiwan.

“The worse thing would be to think that we Europeans must become followers on this topic and take our cue from the US agenda and a Chinese overreaction”, Macron said as he wrapped up his visit to China.

The conversation was about the frequently mentioned concept of ‘strategic autonomy’ of Europe from the US, but it was also about seeking French autonomy regarding the US and the EU.

President Macron, together with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing, sponsored the conclusion of significant business contracts: the construction of a new Airbus production line, the delivery of 160 airplanes and 50 helicopters, the construction of nuclear power plants in China, and contracts in the food and cosmetics industries.

He returned home with billions in contracted jobs, whilst at the same time France was being rocked by nationwide protests against pension reform.

Encouraged by the large contracted deals, and the agreement with the Chinese host on many important issues, Macron returned to Europe to embark boldly on the construction of ‘strategic autonomy’.

European dilution models

Since 2016, France and Macron have been strongly advocating this concept, which would continue rounding off the EU's self-sufficiency in the security sphere after it created a common market in the 1960s, a foreign and security policy in the 1970s, and a monetary union in the 1980s.

Macron's strategy of distancing the EU from US influence received a boost after Brexit and

Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 presidential elections.

Macron's calls for Europeans to cool relations with the US cannot come as a surprise.

Along with advocating ‘strategic autonomy’, or the French version, “European sovereignty”, Macron has advocated other long-term initiatives to redefine the EU as it is today - internally and regarding external partners.

Macron outlined the idea of an EU with three circles. That is, different levels of membership in the European Parliament five years ago. There would have been a place for Turkey and Russia in the third.

His "child" is the so-called European political community, a kind of commonwealth of the EU and all other Europeans (minus Russia and Belarus), whose forum would deepen economic ties and commitment to the fundamental values of European democracy. Macron's effort to redefine the foundations of the EU during his presidency is so far fascinating but not successful.

Destruction of transatlantic ties

After the latest Chinese episode, he also emphasised the risk of the collapse of traditional transatlantic ties as the foundation of European security, and a common focus on global issues.

Washington, for now, has reacted with restraint to Macron's indolence towards China's behaviour concerning Taiwan, and to the French call for the EU not to turn into an American vassal.

“The Biden administration remains comfortable and confident in the terrific bilateral relationship we have with France”, said John Kirby, National Security Council spokesperson.

Still, the Biden administration can fool few with such a casual tone about Macron.

It cannot be an honest assessment of the French president's position, saying that "if the tensions between the two superpowers heat up ... we won't have the time nor the resources to finance our strategic autonomy and we will become vassals".

It cannot reflect the accurate position of the US, because China, just a few hours after Macron's departure, launched new military manoeuvres near Taiwan.

On the other hand, the current coolness of the US towards Macron's views, and the policy towards China, seems like an illusion when it comes to internal relations in the EU, which the French president has shaken again.

Has Macron learned anything from the war in Ukraine?

"Macron has learned nothing from the Ukraine war", Francis Fukuyama wrote on Twitter, after Macron's visit to China.

The avalanche of negative reactions from Europeans to Macron's statements has been put in the context of Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression, which would not have been as efficient without the strong participation of the US.

"If Macron speaks for all of Europe and their position now is, they're not going to pick sides between the US and China over Taiwan, maybe then we should not be taking sides either...and let them handle Ukraine", Republican Senator Mark Rubio said in a video message on Twitter.

And really - does Macron speak for all Europeans? He would certainly like that to be the case, but it is not.

During both of his presidential terms, Macron has shown a desire for France to take over the leadership of the EU after the withdrawal of the UK, but particularly after the departure of Angela Merkel.

To this end, he has offered alternative models

for the reorganisation of the EU, essentially to the richer, therefore more inclined to independence from the US, and to the less rich (the east of the EU), who see no alternative to security and political partnership with the US (and the UK).

Macron's concept for remaking the EU essentially leads to weakening ties within the bloc and NATO.

Macron has been the actor of the only and largest "crack" within both blocs regarding Russia and Putin, when he advocated that Russia should not be "humiliated" in Ukraine, maintaining communication with Putin in the crucial initial weeks of the aggression.

Bureaucrats - important allies of Macron

The only strong support for Macron's attitude towards China and his views on distancing the EU from US politics came from an interesting address: the President of the European Council, Charles Michel.

"EU cannot "blindly, systematically follow Washington", Michel said.

The former Belgian prime minister, and now the chief Euro bureaucrat in Brussels, is a representative of an influential group that could embrace Macron's concepts about moving away from the US, particularly regarding the internal reorganisation of the Union.

This layer of Euro-bureaucrats, in the models advocated by Macron, would strengthen its influence as a supra-national structure, without direct political legitimacy, but also without the influence of national policies, implementing its own political and security course.

These are important allies, because, with their invisible political power, they manage important European decisions, without the obligation to care much about the policies of

the nations that delegated them.

Euro-centrism in relation to the US, and since Macron's recent visit to Beijing, in relation to China, has been the model that leads the Union and the European part of NATO into a space of significant risk for the established internal unity that has been demonstrated since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The French president's aspiration to establish leadership within the EU, for which he seeks the position of an independent global superpower, is opposed by many in the families of which France is a part, but it is viewed with a lot of sympathy in both Beijing and Moscow.