

Emmanuel Macron's urgent message for Europe

The French president issues a dark and prophetic warning



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In 1940, after France had been defeated by the Nazi blitzkrieg, the historian Marc Bloch condemned his country's inter-war elites for having failed to face up to the threat that lay ahead. Today Emmanuel Macron cites Bloch as a warning that Europe's elites are gripped by the same fatal complacency.

France's president set out his apocalyptic vision in an interview with *The Economist* in the Elysée Palace. It came days after his delivery of a big speech about the future of Europe—an unruly, two-hour, Castro-scale marathon, ranging from nuclear annihilation to an alliance of European libraries. Mr Macron's critics called it a mix of electioneering, the usual French self-interest and the intellectual vanity of a Jupiterian president thinking about his legacy.

We wish they were right. In fact, Mr Macron's message is as compelling as it is alarming. In our interview, he warned that Europe faces imminent danger, declaring that "things can fall apart very quickly". He also spoke of the mountain of work ahead to make Europe safe. But he is bedevilled by unpopularity at home and poor relations with Germany. Like other gloomy visionaries, he faces the risk that his message is ignored.

The driving force behind Mr Macron's warning is the invasion of Ukraine. War has changed Russia. Flouting international law, issuing nuclear threats, investing heavily in arms and hybrid tactics, it has embraced "aggression in all known domains of conflict". Now Russia knows no limits, he argues. Moldova, Lithuania, Poland, Romania or any neighbouring country could all be its targets. If it wins in Ukraine, European security will lie in ruins.

Europe must wake up to this new danger. Mr Macron refuses to back down from his declaration in February that Europe should not rule out putting troops in Ukraine. This elicited horror and fury from some of his allies, but he insists their wariness will only encourage Russia to press on: "We have undoubtedly been too hesitant by defining the limits of our action to someone who no longer has any and who is the aggressor."

Mr Macron is adamant that, whoever is in the White House in 2025, Europe must shake off its decades-long military dependence on America and with it the head-in-the-sand reluctance to take hard power seriously. "My responsibility," he says, "is never to put [America] in a strategic dilemma that would mean choosing between Europeans and [its] own interests in the face of China." He calls for an "existential" debate to take place within months. Bringing in non-eu countries like Britain and Norway, this would create a new framework for European defence that puts less of a burden on America. He is willing to discuss extending the protection afforded by France's nuclear weapons, which would dramatically break from Gaullist orthodoxy and transform France's relations with the rest of Europe.

Mr Macron's second theme is that an alarming industrial gap has opened up as Europe has fallen behind America and China. For Mr Macron, this is part of a broader dependence in energy and technology, especially in renewables and artificial intelligence. Europe must respond now, or it may never catch up. He says the Americans "have stopped trying to get the Chinese to conform to the rules of international trade". Calling the Inflation Reduction Act "a conceptual

revolution”, he accuses America of being like China by subsidising its critical industries. “You can’t carry on as if this isn’t happening,” he says.

Mr Macron’s solution is more radical than simply asking for Europe to match American and Chinese subsidies and protection. He also wants a profound change to the way Europe works. He would double research spending, deregulate industry, free up capital markets and sharpen Europeans’ appetite for risk. He is scathing about the dishing-out of subsidies and contracts so that each country gets back more or less what it puts in. Europe needs specialisation and scale, even if some countries lose out, he says.

Voters sense that European security and competitiveness are vulnerable. And that leads to Mr Macron’s third theme, which is the frailty of Europe’s politics. France’s president reserves special contempt for populist nationalists. Though he did not name her, one of those is Marine Le Pen, who has ambitions to replace him in 2027. In a cut-throat world their empty promises to strengthen their own countries will instead result in division, decline, insecurity and, ultimately, conflict.

Mr Macron’s ideas have real power, and he has proved prescient in the past. But his solutions pose problems. One danger is that they might in fact undermine Europe’s security. His plans could distance America, but fail to fill the gap with a credible European alternative. That would leave Europe more vulnerable to Russia’s predations. It would also suit China, which has long sought to deal with Europe and America separately, not as an alliance.

His plans could also fall victim to the unwieldy structure of the eu itself. They require 27 power-hungry governments to cede sovereign control of taxation and foreign policy and to give more influence to the European Commission, which seems unlikely. If Mr Macron’s industrial policy ends up bringing more subsidy and protection, but not deregulation, liberalisation and competition, it would weigh on the very dynamism he is trying to enhance.

And the last problem is that Mr Macron may well fail in his politics—partly because he is unpopular at home. He preaches the need to think Europe-wide and leave behind petty nationalism, but France has for years blocked the construction of power connections with Spain.

He warns of the looming threat of Ms Le Pen, but has so far failed to nurture a successor who can see her off. He cannot tackle an agenda that would have taxed the two great post-war leaders, Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, without the help of Germany's chancellor, Olaf Scholz. Yet their relationship is dreadful.

Mr Macron is clearer about the perils Europe is facing than the leader of any other large country. When leadership is in short supply, he has the courage to look history in the eye. The tragedy for Europe is that the words of France's Cassandra may well fall on deaf ears. ■

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