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THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY OF THE EUROPEAN UNION: WHAT IS IT AIMING FOR? COULD FRANCE CHANGE THE GEOSTRATEGIC COURSE OF EUROPE DURING ITS PRESIDENCY?

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France will take over the Presidency of the European Union for 6 months starting from 1 January 2022. During this period, the President of the Republic will likely also be a candidate for a second term in the presidential election that will take place at the end of April, followed by the legislative elections a month later that will determine the latitude of action of the new president, whoever he or she may be. This “exceptional” Presidency of the EU can therefore be viewed both as a unique catalyst with positive effects on the French political debate – by clearly marking the contending views of the candidates on foreign and European affairs – or, on the contrary, as a “non-moment” in which the same themes are repeated over and over again and are not only lacking in medium- and long-term significance, but are also unlikely to lead to any enthusiasm and renewed interest in the European Union. In short, the two events could cancel each other out or, on the contrary, they could create a virtuous chain.



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A timely coincidence?

This coincidence in terms of the timing may be seen as both a disadvantage and a golden opportunity.

It is disadvantageous, at least for Europe, insofar as the election period is never the most favourable for initiatives that are likely to disturb the present order, since voters often prefer appeasement, certainty, comfort and a minimisation of danger that can provide them with a deceptive sense of reassurance. We have never seen a president elected on the basis of promises for a clean break from the existing European and foreign policy. Moreover, such initiatives would probably not find majority approval in other European governments, and such a failure would be exploited by the opponents of the incumbent.

However, under certain conditions, this coincidental timing could also be a great advantage for the president. First of all, it should be remembered that Emmanuel Macron focused his 2017 campaign largely on Europe, and it was even a dominant theme and an essential marker that supposedly distinguished him from the other candidates. He has already given indications that this approach may be the same in 2022, but in a context that could be even more dramatic than that of five years ago. Secondly, for all that, a resumption of the themes which he has already spoken extensively about in his previous campaign – in particular, the concept of “Europe that protects” – would not be particularly promising, and neither would the record of real successes and the post-Covid 19 recovery plan, or more contrasting results, in particular relating to the “Europe of defence” and beyond the EU’s foreign policy where the real dividing factors lie – ecology, energy and the fight against corruption.

On one hand, the Russian and Chinese threats, which are by no means new, are today even

more visible to all, as the pandemic has had the effect of accentuating their immediate impact. These regimes have themselves moved up a notch in the past five years in terms of their level of internal repression and external aggression. The withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan and Joe Biden’s still erratic approach towards both Putin and Xi Jinping has only reinforced the French President’s aim of strengthening the European defence capabilities.

On the other hand, the French President must take the issue of straightening out his image in Europe seriously, and the French Presidency of the EU coinciding with the presidential campaign will provide the perfect opportunity to update his stance in a more unifying sense. Indeed, after having appeared as the *Wunderkind* of Europe who spoke out the most – and often the best – about Europe’s role on the domestic political scene as well as throughout Europe, while the other leaders remained largely silent, Emmanuel Macron has often been perceived, especially on the part of Northern, Central and Eastern Europe, as the “divider-in-chief”, or even a “danger”. These regions have taken issue with both one of his positions and his methods.

Wunderkind or divider-in-chief? Disrupter or game-changer?

Indeed, even if everyone could have agreed on his severe assessment of the state of the Atlantic Alliance, his remarks on the “brain death” of NATO appeared unacceptable because they were accompanied by a position considered too conciliatory towards Putin’s regime. Without this aspect, they could have given rise to an interesting and stimulating discussion, even if the terms were poorly defined. However, in spite of the undoubtedly strong marks against

the Russian dictator, he remained stuck with the absurd idea of a possibly productive discussion with Russia. No one, including all serious French analysts, understood what his idea of an “architecture of security and trust” with Russia could mean, as long as the current president remains in power. In terms of his method, the French President appeared to give too much prominence to the Franco-German relationship, bringing back to the forefront the suspicion of a “directoire” between the two countries at the expense of other European nations, especially the smaller ones.

The second factor reinforced the first, as Germany was heavily criticised for the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project, its “two-faced” position on Ukraine and its proposed comprehensive agreement on investment (CAI) with the People’s Republic of China. Curiously enough, France started promoting this project at the worst political moment (with the lack of transparency in the management of the pandemic, crimes against humanity against the Uighurs, the brutal repression in Hong Kong and a violation of the handover agreement, increased threats against Taiwan, the strengthening of Beijing’s offensive in terms of its influence in the West, etc.). This whole episode then culminated in a way, with the rejection by the European Council in June 2021 of the German proposal, which was supported by France and Austria, for a European Union/Russia summit.

Now, as the EU Presidency coincides with the French Presidential campaign, it is an ideal time to put these attempts, which cannot be guaranteed to succeed, to an end. This would allow us to kill two birds with one stone: on the one hand, by adding the missing element that would strengthen France’s plea for the reinforcement of European defence, a plea that is today endangered by its position that is con-

sidered to be ambivalent towards the Russian regime; and on the other hand, it would reaffirm France’s ancient and historical tradition in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms, a theme that has been largely forgotten during the five-year term that is now ending and is being carried on in a purely incantatory manner by the executive of the European Union, despite the welcome – although non-binding – resolutions of the European Parliament. This would give Emmanuel Macron the opportunity, internally at least, to hopefully win back some of the left-wing votes that he lost and which he will miss in the second round, and also, at the European level, to appear as the spearhead of liberal Europe. He appeared to be doing so in his first speeches on Europe, but largely lost this image afterwards. It is not enough to defend the rule of law within the European Union against the regimes that endanger it, but it is necessary to be totally coherent in the approach toward the much more profound attacks on freedoms taking place in Europe by external regimes that want its disappearance.

The other significant advantage of such a position for securing the presidency would be threefold: first, it would serve as a structuring thread that could include a series of technical measures in a multitude of domains; second, it would clear up once and for all France’s ambiguities regarding its position on NATO; and third, it would re-establish, internally, a coherence between the so-called “Gaullian” position, which has been interpreted as a principled distance from the United States and complacency towards Moscow, and the European vision.

In short, the French President, during this EU Presidency that will begin on 1 January 2022, must undoubtedly abandon his position as a disrupter if he intends to become a game-changer.

The challenge of the French Presidency: structuring the third stage of European integration

If the French authorities intend to make their mark during the European Union Presidency, their primary focus should not be on rehashing the old and sometimes worn-out themes which, even if they reflected the remarkable successes of the European Union, cannot attract those European citizens residing far away and are unlikely to elicit strong support from those who are already convinced. The French debate, which too often opposes the economists who swear by Europe only on this level, as well as the federalists who, however generous they may be, cannot win over the citizens of the Union in the present circumstances, and the sovereigntists, the favourite meeting place of extremists on both sides, who must also be revived by another perspective.

This is precisely what is required in the third stage of the construction of the EU: after the economic and social stage, then the rule of law and common founding principles, then the geostrategic perspective – in other words, the defence of Europe and its projection abroad, in order to guarantee the inseparable connection between its security and its values. However, until now, Emmanuel Macron has not obtained the expected successes (notably with regard to the European Defence Fund, which has been largely cut from the budget). On the other hand, he has not yet articulated his ideas, precisely because of the Russian trap into which he has unfortunately fallen and the influence of the pseudo-realists (to use a Raymond Aron's term) on a part of his foreign policy. Now, such an articulation would not only be highly promising with regard to the French Presidency, but would also have a rather remarkable impact on the French political debate, notably in the fight

against the illiberal tendencies that sometimes seem to invade that debate, which have even gone so far as to contaminate certain mainstream parties.

Although we do not yet have a detailed list of the French Presidency's intended priorities, we do know that it will deal, in a perfectly legitimate manner, with topics outside of the EU foreign and security policy, and particularly with social matters, which is a dimension of the European Union that must certainly be strengthened in order to increase the support of its citizens. The EU should also address certain issues that, indirectly but explicitly, may be related to its development, such as strengthening the autonomy, or even the independence, of the EU in certain sensitive technological and economic areas. From this point of view, it will be essential for the EU to become more resolute with regard to its strategic autonomy in the field of the internet services, like the Americans, against the Chinese tech giants. For the rest, in addition to a concrete strategy to strengthen its defence capabilities, the EU will have to significantly develop its arsenal of responses to external threats.

Among the threats are the manipulation of information, which is an issue affecting most EU countries. It is essential to strengthen the existing cooperation in this area. However, this effort should not only focus on hard propaganda – a denial of the crimes committed by the Russian and Chinese regimes, both internally and externally, the presentation of NATO as a threat, and the revisionist accounts of past history – but also on the tools being used by the Kremlin in particular to increase the divisions among societies and to amplify the most radical protest movements. Above all, this fight against the manipulation of information must also concern the propaganda that I called "soft", which includes all the stories that are aimed at presenting dictatorships as nor-

mal regimes, strengthening the political and commercial links with these regimes or that are pushing for appeasement in the name of allegedly “shared wrongs”. We must do more, at the European level and in each member state, to prevent this discourse from developing, and governments must do more to counter it. Finally, in the same spirit, France would be well advised to take the initiative to strengthen the fight against corruption, particularly linked to foreign influences. Our legislation must be strengthened against those people who, today too often in a legal manner, are advocating these regimes in Europe or are benefiting from management positions in the companies linked to them.

Precisely because it has never been clearly articulated, in particular by France but not by other countries either, the question of the duality existing in the missions of NATO and the future European defence must be articulated. Perhaps this is less vital in the domestic political debate than with respect to our main allies. However, the current debate on “strategic autonomy” has cast a certain shadow over these issues. Moving forward on the European defence, which will certainly be a priority for the French Presidency, will require the removal of any ambiguity about its goals and the future means, but also about what it cannot be, at least for a long time to come, which is namely an instrument of collective defence in the sense of Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. In short, there must be a greater commitment on the part of Europeans, and especially Germany, to the European defence and, in cases where they are members, to NATO. In parallel, this requires that the United States send clear signals as to the credibility of its deterrence in Europe, particularly with regard to Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova.

Finally, in order to close once and for all the suspicions against France’s attitude towards

the Russian regime, it would be appropriate to adopt a more accurate vision of Gaullism than the one some people claim to have. We should remember that the beginning of the five-year term saw the emergence of a debate that was absurd as well as intellectually risky, coming from some of those who opposed a so-called “Gaullo-Mitterrandian” camp to another supposedly “neo-Conservative” one. Some of Emmanuel Macron’s unfortunate comments at the beginning of his term seemed to show that he recognised himself in terms of this debate. The Presidency of the European Union would provide an opportunity to close this episode. It would be sufficient to recall that General de Gaulle always showed absolute solidarity with the principles of the Alliance when necessary. He praised those principles before the United States Congress in 1960, as well as testifying to them during the second Berlin crisis in 1961, and reiterated his support for the United States during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962. As for François Mitterrand, he showed unambiguous solidarity during the so-called Euromissile crisis in 1982. These positions were not antagonistic or distanced when necessary: in particular, the withdrawal from NATO’s integrated command in 1966 was essentially linked to the affirmation of an independent nuclear deterrent – and after its return to the integrated command, France did not re-join the organisation’s nuclear planning committee. Today, the re-affirmation of such a synthesis does not seem absurd at all. It would make it possible to combine a more serene appreciation of both France’s sovereignty, which is consubstantial with the existence of its nuclear deterrent, and of that Europe and its attachment to the Alliance.

The French presidency of the EU will become a lost opportunity – as the next one will only take place in 14 years, in 2036 – if it is confined to announcements that have little chance of being implemented and to a series of posi-

tions that are either incantatory or slightly dotty. The risk is all the greater given that the timeframe of the presidency will be at most three months. This could have both a negative impact on the presidential debate on Europe and on the support of the other EU member

states, which might tend to see it simply as a tool for domestic politics. However, despite the real risk, this does not have to be the case. There is a path that France can trace, some of the lines of which are shown here. I hope that this will be the case.

