

Opinion – Macron’s Pivot Towards Russia

Written by Kareem Salem

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KAREEM SALEM, AUG 22 2020

Russia has become an important component of Emmanuel Macron’s foreign policy. In his first sorties on the world stage, Macron sought to reconnect with his Russian counterpart at the Château de Versailles in an effort to reset relations. Under François Hollande’s presidency, relations with Moscow were marred by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern Ukraine, as well as by Franco-Russian disagreements over Syria at the United Nations Security Council. Thus, Macron sought to pivot away from the neoconservative diplomatic approach of his predecessor, by seeking to open a new chapter in relations between Paris and Moscow.

Macron’s vision is rooted in French foreign policy promulgated under President Charles de Gaulle. In the midst of the Cold War, the founder of the Cinquième République had the vision that the Soviet Union should be encompassed in a united Europe stretching from the Atlantic to Urals and, as such, he believed that France had an interest in overcoming its divisions with it. This political effort has now been revived under Macron in response to the structural changes in international relations that have been accelerated under the Trump administration. Indeed, French and European security interests have been undermined by Donald Trump’s disparaging views on multilateral security alliances and disinterest for multilateral arms control treaties.

Thus convening with President Vladimir Putin at the French presidential summer retreat of the Fort de Brégançon days before the 2019 G-7 summit in Biarritz, offered Macron an excellent opportunity to further underscore his effort to portray France as a balancing power between Russia and its rivals. Indeed, the meeting gave Macron the opportunity to express his hope to see the return of the G-8 format, which saw Russia join the world’s leading developed economies. The tête-à-tête between the two leaders also proved essential in rebuilding the foundations for collective security cooperation with Russia in resolving the conflict in eastern Ukraine – a significant achievement for French diplomacy given that on December 9 2019, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with his Russian counterpart, marking the reopening of the Normandy format negotiations which led to a mutual commitment by both sides to set up prisoner exchanges and to implement a ceasefire in the Donbass, which became operational on July 27.

With progress made in easing tensions in the Donbass, Macron needs to delicately ensure that overtures to Russia are not one-way. In leading from the front, Macron needs to press Putin to compromise the restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty over its eastern border in exchange for guaranteed rights and protection of Russian speaking minorities in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblast. This is important for French diplomacy, considering that Paris has not been able to find broad support among its eastern European allies for a European reset in relations with Russia. European countries sharing a border with Russia are Atlanticist in their outlook and immediately fear Moscow using subversive activities to infringe their sovereignty. Since 2014, Lithuania has faced a constant stream of cyberattacks against its government departments, and Russian military aircrafts regularly violate its national airspace. Thus, Lithuania and its neighbouring allies have naturally been displeased with the unilateral overtures of the French President to his Russian counterpart.

Macron’s position on Russia has also undermined the European Union’s enlargement efforts. The French President’s veto against the opening of EU accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia was criticised at the time by the former EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, who publicly dubbed the decision as a terrible mistake. The geopolitical reasoning behind Macron’s decision is straightforward – Macron calculated that reaching

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out to Tirana and Skopje would antagonise Russia and undermine his efforts to develop a security partnership with Putin. Indeed, Russia considers that it has historical, cultural, economic and political stakes in the Western Balkans. Religious diplomacy has been an instrument of choice, in which Russia seeks to resuscitate pan-Slavism and unite the Slavic world under Russian patronage by erecting churches across predominant Slavic countries of the region. Russia has also made energy its main tool for strengthening its economic influence in the Western Balkans, where it holds an energy monopoly in Serbia, Republika Srpska, and North Macedonia.

Inevitably, Macron’s “non” has not only strained the EU’s leverage efforts in the Western Balkans but also fuelled political havoc, especially in North Macedonia. The decision undermined the political credibility of former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, who undertook important reforms prior to EU accession, notably signing the Prespa agreement with Greece, which ended a 27-year dispute between the two countries over the correct use of the term “Macedonia”, in which the Zaev government changed it to North Macedonia. This agreement sparked outrage among Skopje’s political opposition and among the people of Macedonia. France’s decision to veto North Macedonia’s accession process sapped Zaev’s entire justification for signing the Prespa agreement and ultimately ended his mandate. While the centre-left Social Democratic Union of Macedonia has been able to reduce the collateral damage by winning the largest share in vote during July 15 parliamentary elections, the conservative nationalist and anti-EU VMRO-DPMNE party finished a close second, meaning that continued support for EU-led reform will remain a challenge.

In view of these developments, Macron needs to calibrate his Russian strategy. Constructive and productive dialogue should be pursued in resolving long-lasting conflicts over Ukraine, Libya and Syria, but at the same time, selective engagement with Russia cannot come at the cost of undermining EU integration efforts across countries that do not directly border Russia. In this respect, Paris and Brussels cannot remain ambivalent about Russia’s influence campaigns in the Western Balkans designed to fuel democratic backsliding and ultimately delaying EU accession efforts.

These efforts are part of Putin’s desire to regain Russia’s grandeur that it once enjoyed under the Soviet Union. This inclination emerged during Dmitry Medvedev’s tenure in office, particularly following his decision not to oppose pro-democratic protests that ignited Tunisia and Egypt in late 2010 and his reluctance to veto a UNSC vote authorising Western intervention in Libya. These events marked Putin significantly, reminding him of the so-called “colour revolutions” which took place in the former USSR republics in 2003–2005. For Putin, the wave of protests and civil unrest that swept through the Middle East had the potential to spark unrest in Russia. Ever since his return to the Kremlin in 2012, Putin has framed international relations in terms of fierce competition.

However, with the coronavirus pandemic stagnating the Russian economy, it remains plausible that Putin may fine-tune his geopolitical strategy to adapt to these new realities. Indeed, the ongoing pandemic has inflicted falling prices for Russia’s energy exports, steep rise in unemployment and reduced fiscal revenues, which will test Putin’s resolve to continue financing his costly proxy war against Ukraine in the Donbass. The Kremlin normally spends approximately \$3.7 billion a year in waging the prolonged static war. It is therefore not inconceivable that Putin may work towards achieving some settlement in order to decrease spending on Donbass and increase Russia’s political influence in Ukraine and in its neighbourhood.

Mass protests in Belarus have prompted Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko to solicit Russia’s help, giving Putin the opportunity to influence the course of events. Yet, Putin’s relations with the Belarussian President have been strained in recent years by Lukashenko’s sporadic feints at improving relations with the West and reluctance to advance integration talks with Russia. Belarus is not Ukraine 2014; the uprising is not fuelled by a desire to break with Moscow and align with the West through eventual membership in NATO and the EU. The Kremlin knows that intervening militarily would lose it the goodwill of the Belarussian people. This may encourage Putin to remain on the sidelines for the time being and to work with certain close contacts of the opposition movement, notably Valery Tsapkala, who fled to Moscow before the Belarussian presidential elections, should the situation become untenable for Lukashenko.

All in all, European countries must remain vigilant against Russia’s meddling activities in Eastern Europe.

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