FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 13.04.2023 | Gesine Weber

Communication à la Macron

Macron does not tire of debating issues which are uncomfortable for Europeans. But his methods are often counterproductive

Emmanuel Macron is known for being the biggest proponent of the European strategic autonomy project – and equally known for upsetting partners with his calls to strengthen Europe in the world. This pattern runs like a red thread through his presidency: when he first outlined the concept of European strategic autonomy in his Sorbonne speech in 2017 and called on Europeans to do significantly more in the areas of security and defence policy but also in areas such as climate, industry or technology, criticism was not long in coming. Even though French diplomats and experts did not tire of explaining that Macron was explicitly in favour of a decidedly European strategy, the concept of 'autonomy' had an almost disturbing effect on many partners, who associated it with a decision against the transatlantic alliance and in favour of European 'solo riding'.

Provoking (un-)consciously

The fact that many of Macron's comments in the following years often triggered similar reactions – one thinks of NATO's 'brain death' – did not contribute to the popularity of the concept of European strategic autonomy. In fact, it is Macron's communication style that repeatedly triggers debates and doubts: Macron presents ambitious concepts in speeches, not infrequently with allusions that are difficult for a non-French audience to understand; he provokes consciously or unconsciously; he tests the partners' reactions – and usually faces headwind for this.

After his trip to Beijing, Macron has now applied this method to a new dimension. More specifically, this concerns an interview with Les Echos in which Macron talks about Europe's role in the conflict between China and the US. Even before looking at the content, it is clear that the timing of this interview is poor: whereas EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen had given a speech on the direction of Europe's China policy

before the joint visit with Macron in Beijing, Macron gave the aforementioned interview on his return flight from his meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping. Particularly problematic in this context is Macron's statement on Taiwan ('We as Europeans are concerned about our unity. [...] The Chinese are also concerned about their unity, and Taiwan, from their point of view, is part of it. It is important to understand how they think'). While an understanding of China's strategic thinking is undoubtedly central to Europe, Macron's formulation clearly diverges from the European consensus and replicates the Chinese narrative.

In the context of his visit to China, it is easy for his statements to create the image of Macron as an opponent of the transatlantic alliance.

It is even less surprising that Macron's statements on Taiwan irritate partners in the EU and Washington. Macron states that the worst possible scenario is a situation in which Europe exclusively follows others and has to adapt to 'the American rhythm and a Chinese overreaction'. He received sharp criticism from experts for this analysis – and rightly so. The fact that Macron reiterated the French position on the situation in Taiwan and the Indo-Pacific – status quo for Taiwan and freedom of the sea routes – in a press conference with the Dutch prime minister a few days later and underlined the role of transatlantic cooperation shows his ability to correct course. However, the statements did not contribute to France's credibility.

In the context of his visit to China, it is easy for his statements to create the image of Macron as an opponent of the transatlantic alliance. Following his remarks on China, he explained how important it was for Europeans to define their strategies on the basis of their own interests. As an example, he cites the US Inflation Reduction Act, which, among other things, grants tax credits for climate-friendly technology made in America, whereas European-made products are disadvantaged. Especially for Washington, which sees China as its most important strategic challenge and the most important field of cooperation with partners, this is more than irritating. Against the backdrop of the comprehensive military engagement of the US in Ukraine – which, in fact, would not be feasible by the Europeans and has dispelled doubts about the US commitment to European security, at least in the short term – it is hardly surprising that his statements are also sharply criticised in other European states, especially those with a transatlantic tradition, such as Germany or the Czech Republic.

A damage of credibility

Macron's main problem lies in his communication and his method: it is hard to imagine a moment when his comments would have seemed even more inappropriate than in the context he chose. French diplomats will be busy over the next few days trying to mend fences and explain what the French president was really concerned about: namely, that Europe must find its own strategy based on decidedly European interests instead of blindly following a US strategic doctrine. In doing so, since 2017, Macron has continuously underlined that this is not in conflict with the transatlantic relationship but only means that Europe clearly defines its interests and pursues them even if they are not in line with the US approach.

Macron's method of communicating this vision to European partners through ambitious speeches is not working. It seems, metaphorically speaking, like a radically pro-European elephant in a transatlantic porcelain shop that just seemed to slowly start opening up to the idea of an independent European strategy. The advantage of Macron's method is that it forces European partners to also think openly about questions of European strategy and geopolitics. However, the damage to France's credibility is massive.

Ultimately, this approach is counterproductive not only for the perception of Macron in Europe but also for the project of European strategic autonomy. In essence, however, it is indispensable: it is obvious that the interests of the EU and the US are not congruent on a number of issues and in particular vis-à-vis China. The US is not afraid to compete with China by means that harm Europe – think of the Inflation Reduction Act or extraterritorial sanctions that also affect European companies. At the same time, Europe has security policy interests, for example in the Mediterranean, that are at best peripherally relevant to the US. Europe must prepare itself for these cases by being aware of its interests, defining a strategy and equipping itself with the means to act accordingly.

In other words, European strategic autonomy is becoming more and more of a reality in many areas – certainly not least thanks to Macron's ambitions.

In fact, much has already been developed in this direction in recent years in Europe, also due to a French initiative: examples are the European Defence Fund, the European Peace Facility – which is currently financing European arms deliveries to Ukraine – the Strategic Compass, the European Green Deal, or industrial policy initiatives such as the Chips Act and the Critical Raw Materials Act.

In their documents, the European institutions increasingly speak of 'European sovereignty' – a term that France replaced European strategic autonomy with during its Council Presidency in the first half of 2022 but which means nothing else. In other words, European strategic autonomy is becoming more and more of a reality in many areas – certainly not least thanks to Macron's ambitions. In view of the numerous initiatives of the European Commission, such as the economic security strategy announced by von der Leyen, now is a good time to hold precisely these debates. The steps taken by the EU in recent years show that concrete projects for this can also win support from states that are fundamentally critical of Macron and his ambitions.

Macron's method, however, is a dilemma for the project of European strategic autonomy: on the one hand, it thrives on his ambitions and the fact that Macron does not tire of repeatedly conducting a debate that is uncomfortable for many European partners – not least because it forces a view of the transatlantic relationship through the lens of genuinely European interests. At the same time, the 'Macron method' often leads to massive collateral damage and to a debate that is much more heated and ideological than it should be.



Gesine Weber
New York

Gesine Weber is a Visiting Scholar at the Arnold A. Saltzman Institute for War and Peace Studies at Columbia University. She is also a Research Fellow at the German Marshall Fund in Paris, specialising in European security and defence policy.