

Macron's European army is an insult to NATO and the Americans who pay for it
Tim Collins - The Telegraph

As citizens of other nations attempt to escape the [crisis-hit Sudanese capital Khartoum](#), one thing stands out: it's an 'every man for himself' scramble. Armed forces from around the world and across the region are hastily attempting to get their nationals out, but one government – or aspiring government, perhaps – is notable by its absence. That's the European Union.



French President Emmanuel Macron, right, poses for a photo with a reenactor soldier during a ceremony as part of the celebrations of the centenary of the First World War - Philippe Wojazer/Reuters Pool© Philippe Wojazer/Reuters Pool

That's odd, because the EU – as distinct from NATO – has theoretically had a variety of different rapid-response forces for decades, way back to the European Rapid Operational Force announced in 1995 (and disbanded in 2012).

The latest foolish plan along these lines is French President Macron's call last month for a European army able to act independently of the US and NATO, including a 5,000-strong "rapid response force".

In fairness to Macron, he was the one who called the warring Sudanese generals and brokered a ceasefire of sorts, which has helped a lot with the initial rescue efforts. He was pushing on an open door as it was in the interests of both sides for foreigners to leave unscathed, but it was nonetheless a minor diplomatic win for Macron.

Macron, of course, needs every win he can get given the fact that France is basically in a state of insurrection at the moment. The other lever that French presidents traditionally reach for in times of domestic crisis is bashing the US or NATO.

Macron's recent calls for an EU rapid response force could be dismissed as a swipe at NATO, except that he is apparently serious about trying to develop some kind of EU-only military capability.

It's not the most foolish insult to NATO and the USA that a French president has ever offered – that would probably be the “get out and stay out” call by Charles De Gaulle in 1966 – but it is intensely rude and unhelpful in these tense times.

Macron's apologists would doubtless point to the [Aukus pact](#) and argue that the UK and US are drifting away from the defence of Europe; but Aukus is exactly the opposite of that. It is a focus on the real emerging threat: China.

We must remember that NATO was formed in 1947, the same year that the US Joint Chiefs of Staff stood up to address the new threats of a Cold War world. Today there is talk of creating a civilian equivalent of the Joint Chiefs to manage US civilian departments effectively and efficiently against the burgeoning Chinese menace.

France could learn from this sort of thinking.

Anything that undermines the cohesiveness of the West and NATO is music to Chinese ruler Xi Jinping's ears. Xi knows that his main adversary, the US, must build and strengthen a network of alliances as the red dragon begins to spread its wings. While the current focus is on Taiwan, analysts with broader vision watch the humble deference Putin is showing to Xi out of necessity.

It's not too soon to wonder about the future of the Russian Far East – parts of which have a Chinese ethnic majority – in the event of a collapsed or badly weakened regime in Moscow. Given Xi's clear intent to unify China and the Chinese, including Taiwan and elsewhere, it's to be hoped that the right people in the Pentagon and elsewhere are already thinking about this.

Such a shift in focus by China could happen sooner than one might think. If we suppose that the current war in Ukraine were to end with the collapse of Putin's regime, it might not be only Ukraine that wound up joining NATO. A badly weakened Russia, potentially newly free and democratic in that scenario, might ask to join NATO as well.

The Motherland would certainly need some new friends in that case. Such an upheaval would bring NATO eyeball to eyeball with the People's Republic across the soon to be disputed Siberian tundra.

However things play out in the Ukraine and with China, a strong NATO is absolutely vital to the security of the West – and, bluntly, to the security of France. NATO members must and should shoulder their share of the burden by paying 2 per cent of GDP towards defence: just seven of the 30 member nations currently do so. France does not, for instance.

It is shameful that the USA accounts for fully 70 per cent of the alliance's defence expenditure, and even more shameful that Macron is calling for European members to commit their forces – already too small – to a mickey-mouse EU force structure that nobody will take seriously.

Anything that undermines NATO is playing with fire. Even if enough troops can be robbed from existing NATO commitments or double-hatted, an EU force would be

crippled at birth by the very nature of the EU. Agreement on its mission, its command and on actually deploying it would be Byzantine and unlikely to happen.

The EU army would also be hamstrung by the military limitations of its members. The recent French deployment to Mali highlighted one of the major shortcomings of any such force: airlift.

In the case of Mali, Britain provided the necessary US-made C-17 and Chinook heavy transports and choppers. Britain's C-17s are the only heavy long-range military transport planes in Western Europe: Britain's Chinooks are the only viable heavy helicopters.

Part of the calculation that Putin made when he invaded Ukraine was the ineffectiveness and lack of cohesion of NATO. The concerted response of the US, the UK and many European nations in arming and supporting Ukraine came as an unpleasant shock to him.

That response has not gone unnoticed in Beijing either. Any invasion of Taiwan would involve a 180 km opposed crossing of the Taiwan Strait: a feat impossible without naval, air and missile-bombardment supremacy as well as the complete physical and military isolation of Taiwan. The very existence of a strong and unified NATO makes those conditions near impossible.

President Macron must understand, despite his domestic political problems, that continued aspiration to an unviable EU force independent of NATO and the USA fundamentally undermines the defence of the West. That includes the defence of France.

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