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***France, Russia and European Security:
The Rise and Fall of Emmanuel Macron's Grand Strategy***

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Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked the fall of the grand strategy formulated and pursued consistently and with great determination by French President Emmanuel Macron since he was first elected in April 2017. Over the course of his initial five years mandate, he proved unable to reach one of his central objectives, creating a new "architecture of trust and security" in Europe incorporating Vladimir Putin's Russia.

In this short essay, I make three arguments. First, I show that Emmanuel Macron *had* a grand strategy designed to achieve long term security for France and Europe with a distinctive view regarding the role of Russia. Second, his grand strategy was grounded in a particular perception of Vladimir Putin's Russia. Third, President Macron's overconfidence was the main source of the downfall of his grand strategy. In conclusion, I address alternative explanations and derive broader implications for Emmanuel Macron's second mandate and for assessing grand strategies.

I / Emmanuel Macron's Grand Strategy, 2017-2022

A grand strategy brings together the vision, plans and policies that comprise an organized political actor's deliberate effort to harness all its resources to advance its long-term security interests (Silove 2018; Vennesson 2021). Grand strategies commonly refer to organizing principles and overarching ideas consciously held and used by policy-makers to guide their decisions. Grand strategies also include long-term plans designed to harness all elements of national power: political, military, industrial, societal, psychological, diplomatic,

etc. to address threat/opportunities. Lastly, grand strategies are reflected in a pattern of behavior, they are embedded in specific policy actions which arise from these principles and plans. For example, containment was the U.S. grand strategy during the Cold War.

To be sure, grand strategies take many different forms and have various degrees of consistency and effectiveness. But one can generally identify a number of typical grand strategic activities such as the overall balancing of ends and means, and the long-term scope moving, for example, beyond the present war to plans for the future peace. Grand strategies also strive to be holistic: they bring together a range of instruments: military, diplomatic, economic, ideational instruments/spheres of statecraft and they are about large, vital, ultimate interests (for a range of perspective: Balzacq, Krebs, eds. 2021).

I summarize below the principles, plans and policies of Emmanuel Macron's grand strategy, focusing on one central dimension, European security and, particularly, his views about Putin's Russia. His grand strategy had of course other dimensions and regional focus, such as Asia Pacific for example, but I leave them aside here (for a valuable overview: Duclos 2021). My main point is that whatever one's assessment of this grand strategy, there was one.

Principles. Emmanuel Macron's electoral success in 2017 was commonly portrayed as putting a halt to the populist wave which from Brexit to the election of Donald Trump was engulfing Western countries. His professional background as both civil servant and banker, his high-profile pro-European commitment, emphasis on individual rights and economic competition seemed to point to a broadly liberal worldview (Duclos 2021, p. 276). While this understanding may have been correct domestically, in international affairs it proved inaccurate. The key sources of inspiration of Emmanuel Macron were Charles De Gaulle and François Mitterrand and he was keen to break with his immediate predecessors Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande. He repeatedly portrayed France as a non-aligned, independent "balanced

power” which, while belonging to the West, should not limit its foreign policy to its Western roots. While he certainly focused on Europe in a context of Euroscepticism, he emphasized the need for European autonomy and sovereignty (however ultimately defined and operationalized). He also proclaimed his respect for statehood and heads of states (Duclos 2021, p. 276). This is not to say that the French president was a theorist of international affairs, far from it. His references remained eclectic and the conceptual and ideological framework that he relied upon was understood first and foremost in an operational, pragmatic sense. Still, all this formed a set of broadly realist principles and ideas which shaped his grand strategy.

Plan. Emmanuel Macron’s grand strategy was not merely about principles, however. He formulated and made public his specific plan for European security. This plan sketched and then systematized in 2017-2019 was designed to develop with Russia an agenda of “trust and security.” To be sure, Emmanuel Macron was far from alone in his conviction that European countries must somewhat “deal”, and preferably develop a serious engagement, with Russia. In Germany, to take only one well-known example, a long succession of chancellors, industry leaders, journalists and the public embraced the belief that engaging Russia was necessary and mutual beneficial. The key difference is that Emmanuel Macron, contrary to his two predecessors Nicolas Sarkozy and François Holland who were much more lukewarm toward Putin’s Russia, embraced, and spent international political capital on an ambitious project. In his view, the long-term security interest of France and Europe and their autonomy can only be guaranteed if they can somewhat include Russia. Time and again, he publicly reiterated that ignoring Russia or pushing Russia away from Europe was a profound strategic mistake. It would only increase tensions between Russia and Europe and it would ultimately push Vladimir Putin and his associates to ally with other great powers, notably China. Letting Russia drift under China’s influence would be bad news for Europe. This broad plan was outlined in his initial priorities as early as May 2017 and it was publicly articulated in a more systematic way

notably in a widely publicized speech to the diplomatic corps in August 2019 and in a combative style in an interview published by *The Economist* in November 2019.

Behaviour. Some scholars doubt whether the consistent implementation over time of a preconceived grand strategic design is even possible, let alone likely (Sinnreich 2011) For ill or good, Emmanuel Macron made strenuous and consistent efforts to put his grand strategy into action spending a good deal of international political capital in the process. I highlight three key episodes to illustrate the ways in which the French president's grand strategy shaped his behavior.

In May 2017, one month after his election, Emmanuel Macron invited Vladimir Putin to an official visit in France, notably marked by a high-profile visit at the Palace of Versailles which hosted an exhibit devoted to Peter the Great. One month earlier, President Hollande had rejected such a visit. Emmanuel Macron told his guest that he was well aware of serious Russian interference against him during the election campaign. He was also extremely critical of Russian media. Yet, after this clearing of the air, he thought a frank dialogue could lead to genuine results particularly on Ukraine and Syria. Emmanuel Macron followed up in the subsequent weeks and months with multiple phone calls on these issues. A year later, Macron reciprocated with an official visit at the Economic Forum of St Petersburg (May 2018). The French President delivered his first substantial speech devoted to the relations between France, Europe, and Russia and laid out some key aspects of his grand strategy. In August 2019, Emmanuel Macron sought an even stronger engagement with Vladimir Putin by inviting him and his wife at his official retreat of Brégançon Fort, an islet off the French Riviera to discuss Ukraine ahead of the G7 meeting. Lastly, President Macron announced his intention to visit Moscow in May 2020 for 75th anniversary of Victory Day celebration. Vladimir Putin expected a Franco-Russian declaration on security in Europe but in the end, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the visit was cancelled. In short, from the very beginning of his first presidential

mandate, Emmanuel Macron made a genuine effort to engage with Vladimir Putin. He saw Putin's Russia as potentially a valuable partner and that he could have a meaningful impact on Putin.

II / Macron's Perception of Putin's Russia

To be sure, as he came to power Emmanuel Macron was well aware of the deep strains between European countries, France and Putin's Russia. After all Russian cyber-attacks targeted his own presidential campaign and the Kremlin openly supported his extreme right challenger Marine Le Pen. He also knew that Putin's deeply conservative agenda sought to destabilize democracies and undermine the European Union.

In his August 2019 speech to the diplomatic corps, Emmanuel Macron presented his understanding of Vladimir Putin's core motivations (Duclos 2021, pp. 276-277. This vision is worth comparing to: Taylor 2018). Arising from the intelligence services, the Russian President heads a highly disorganized state and believes to be under siege. The roots of misunderstandings with the United States and European countries dates back to the end of the Cold War. European countries without their own strategy gave the impression to be Trojan horse of the "West" with the final aim of destroying Russia.

According to Macron, Putin seek to achieve three main objectives: restore a powerful Russian imaginary to keep his country together, fight against terrorism, including violent insurgencies, based on exclusive religious identities and ensure that Russia does not become a failed state. Yet, these objectives are unsustainable. The French presidents notes that this great power which invests heavily in its armament and may appear scary to many in Europe is an aging country with a small GDP and increasing domestic political tensions and a legitimacy crisis.

In his view, faced with that situation three options are open to Vladimir Putin. First, he could try to rebuild Russia's power alone. But due to the identity conservatism that he promotes and the rejection of Muslim migration that could help revive the economy, this option is unlikely to succeed. The second option is the "Eurasia model" but this, according to Macron, would mean ultimately becoming a satellite of China. Lastly, Putin could rebuild a balanced and mutually beneficial position with Europe.

Europeans should indeed provide and facilitate that third option and promote a new "architecture of trust and security" in Europe. While they should not be weak vis-à-vis Russia, deny their disagreements, or get friendly at any cost, they must profoundly rethink their antagonism with Russia. To the French president, there will be neither stability nor security for Europe if relation with Russia is not pacified and clarified. Most importantly, Europeans should deal themselves with their neighbourhood policy. They cannot and should not let this policy managed by others, notably the United States, who simply do not have the same interests. Yet, achieving such an objective presupposes that both Putin's Russia and most European country see the problem in similar terms.

III / Overconfidence and the Failure of Macron's Grand Strategy

Emmanuel Macron's grand strategy on European security did not have any discernable impact on Putin's Russia. Between 2017 and 2022 one is hard pressed to identify any significant improvement in the relations between France and Russia or in Russia's role in European security. French diplomats were unable to make gains on Syria and on Ukraine. For example, in December 2019 the "Normandy format" negotiation on Donbass involving Germany, France, Russia, and Ukraine remained deadlocked. In fact, new sources of tensions popped up from Russia's intervention in Libya, Central African Republic or Mali notably through the increasing role of the Wagner private military company (Duclos 2021, 502). In March 2018, Emmanuel

Macron supported the UK in the punitive measures against Russia following the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal by means of a Novichok nerve agent. Emmanuel Macron's grand strategy also proved, to some extent, counterproductive with European countries and with the US.

Although multiple factors undoubtedly played a role in limiting the effects of Emmanuel Macron's grand strategy, I suggest that overconfidence was at the core and helps connects different dimensions of this underperformance. Following decision-making researcher Don Moore, I approach overconfidence as one's excessively positive estimate of one's potential, ability, or accuracy of judgement in a particular situation (Moore 2020, p. 9) It is "neither a personality trait nor a measure of self-worth" but an assessment that takes into account both one's beliefs about one's ability and one's accuracy of judgment as well as the facts about the situation (Moore 2020, p. 6). In turn, this appraisal forms the basis for "predictions about the future and what one can realistically accomplish." (Moore 2020, p. 6) Cognitive psychologists commonly distinguish three types of overconfidence: over estimation, when people think they are better than they really are; over placement, when they think they are better than others; and over precision, when they are too sure they know the truth (Moore 2020, pp. 7-8).

Emmanuel Macron's foundational political experience was shaped by the fact that he became president at 39 years old as an unknown candidate with no previous political mandate, and without the support of any pre-existing political party. Clever, confident in his own judgement and in his capacity to prevail against the odds, there is plenty of evidence that he relied on a personal style impulsive, peremptory, self-confident and risk seeking. Despite his lack of experience in international politics (as opposed to both French and European politics), the French President was more likely to draw on his own impressions and understood diplomacy as a series of bold moves in which his capacity as a deal maker could shine.

This overestimation fuelled a strong personalization of grand strategy. This trend goes beyond the well-known strong role of the executive branch in foreign affairs. President Macron publicly rebuked diplomats by associated them with the “deep state” and distrusted their assessment of Putin’s Russia. He strongly believes in the unique role of personal diplomacy, notably because it is expected to provide importance evidence about the intentions of the negotiating partners. Personal impressions would provide credible information. Macron also considered that frank and direct explanations between leaders was the way to conduct diplomatic relations at the highest level (Duclos 2021, p. 369). His priority was the dodged, pragmatic search for concrete results and the setting up of deadlines in the style of a banker anxious to close the deal.

President Macron also proved overconfident in his own assessment of Vladimir Putin at least during the specific 2017-2022 period. The Russian President remained relatively indifferent to French initiatives. He had but contempt for European countries and did not take President Macron sufficiently seriously. Macron’s initiative could pique his interest if it generated interest among other European countries not if it remained a purely French initiative. In fact, Putin always saw the possibility to use Macron to divide Europeans and weaken Transatlantic ties (Duclos 2021, p. 502).

Lastly, his belief to be better than others (over placement) led him to underestimate and neglect European allies. Many aspects of his grand strategy contradict the European mainstream yet France would be unable to implement such a design alone. Central and oriental European as well as Scandinavian countries do not share the French president’s grand strategic views and his assessment of Putin’s Russia (Vennesson 2010). There were also strong doubts in the United Kingdom and Germany. They were quick to point at what they see as a central contradiction in Emmanuel Macron’s grand strategy, the impossibility of having both European strategic autonomy and sovereignty and, simultaneously, more openings toward Putin’s Russia. Many

also consider that the entire question is simply too complex and its consequences too serious to be solved by Europeans themselves and should systematically involve the United States. For many European countries, the policy toward Russia should not be a “European” policy but a Transatlantic one. Many European leaders saw in Macron’s grand strategy the worst possible combination of French unilateral openings to Russia combined with deliberate and provocative public criticisms of NATO as well as public antagonism with Erdogan’s Turkey.

Conclusion: Lessons for Grand Strategies in Action

In sum, Emmanuel Macron’s grand strategy for European security did not bring about the results he expected. Ironically, the French President took the six months rotating presidency of the Council of Europe in January 2022 just as the crisis and then the Russian war against Ukraine shattered any hope of a short to mid-term accommodation with Russia.

Designing and implementing a grand strategy is challenging however, and it is important to acknowledge the limits of this short analysis (Wohlforth 2021). First, I focus here on one aspect of Emmanuel Macron’s grand strategy only: his design for European security and engagement with Russia. In order to assess his grand strategy as a whole, the other dimensions of his external actions should be assessed as well (see, for example: Duclos 2021). Second, I assess President Macron’s project for European security during his first mandate from 2017 until 2022 a period severely affected by the disruption related to the COVID-19 pandemic. To be sure, one could argue that a five-year period is simply too short to assess grand strategic design which are, by definition, long term. His grand strategic ambition may appear in a more positive light in ten or twenty years from now, assuming of course that his grand strategy would continue to be implemented.

One could also claim that dealing with Putin’s Russia and European security from 2017 until 2022 was a challenge of such magnitude that, in fact, no grand strategy had any hope of

success, only degrees of greater or lesser failure. It may have been the right grand strategy but suffered from bad timing as Putin opted for a systematic confrontation around the same time. Moreover, one would have to compare Macron's grand strategy to others and assess them relatively to one another. It would be also important to compare Macron's grand strategy to alternatives, such as the policies of his predecessors Nicolas Sarkozy and François Holland toward Russia. One could also argue that while Macron's grand strategy was unable to produce positive results, it still had some limited value in a negative sense. It may have helped identify some genuine contradictions among European countries about Russia which could be unsustainable over time, notably the mixture of fear of Russia but the acceptance of European weakness, the belief that the United States will always be available to help and the parallel refusal to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Russia about European security. It remains to be seen whether Emmanuel Macron will alter his grand strategy for his second mandate (2022-2027). In his management of the Ukraine crisis and war some changes have already been visible: more consultations with European and American allies, more respect for Transatlantic cohesion and more firmness against Putin's Russia. In the end, the French President did not sacrifice Western solidarity.

Lastly, the rise and fall of Emmanuel Macron's grand strategy has broader lessons for practitioners and students of grand strategy. An excessively personalized style of authority can contribute the whole point of a grand strategy which is to harness all the elements of national power. For example, the French presidents dismissed the existing diplomatic expertise on Russia and did not engage sufficiently in a meaningful coordination with European allies. Skeptics about the notion of grand strategy often claim that instances of governments sticking to a plan for any length of time, in the face of chance events and the resistance of other actors, has been the exception rather than the rule. Yet, the opposite flaw can be equally problematic:

sticking to a grand strategy for too long, dismissing chance events and ignoring or underestimating resistance of other actors.

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