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The return of Helenus (or retribution for Cassandra's ignored warnings?)

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Daughter of King Priam and Queen Hecuba, sister of Hector and Paris, and twin sister of Helenus, Cassandra was a Trojan princess during the famous Trojan War, as told in Homer's *Iliad*. She was a priestess of Apollo, who admired her for her beauty and offered her the gift of prophecy in exchange for her love. Convinced he had swayed the priestess into accepting his advances (a common occurrence in Greek mythology), the god of music, beauty and sunlight was outraged when the princess spurned him. Seeking retaliation, Apollo could not take back the gift, but he could twist it into a cruel curse: Cassandra would be able to foresee future events but was doomed not to be believed by her peers and family when she tried to warn them of the catastrophes that would follow.

Why does this article talk about a Greek myth, you might ask, and what does Cassandra's curse have to do with European political affairs? Well, if history has taught us anything, it is that Greek myths often reflect real life, and important political figures have often been compared to mythological characters.

If you have kept up with European news, you will know that one of the hottest topics among politicians is Europe's 'strategic autonomy'. This old slogan has found new momentum following recent geopolitical developments, which are analysed in this issue of the *European View*.

Although this concept still needs to be clarified, its objectives are clear: to develop a truly European defence that allows Europeans to protect their continent without over-relying on the more and more uncertain US umbrella, to phase out what remains of

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Russian gas imports, to decrease Europe's strategic dependence on critical minerals and supply chains from China and to establish a unified foreign policy. Behind this plan lies the growing uncertainty about the future of transatlantic relations, which has been exacerbated by the eventful (to say the least) first 100 days of the Trump administration; the continuation of the war in Ukraine; the diverging approaches of the US and the EU towards the Israeli–Palestinian issue; and, of course, the danger of new aggressive actions by a Russian regime emboldened by Trump's remissive attitude towards it. However, the difficulties intrinsic to EU decision-making on matters related to national sovereignty complicate the realisation of such an idea, as do differences in public opinion and political trends among the member states.

To get to the point, in recent political debates in France, numerous participants have praised de Gaulle for having predicted the need for European defensive autonomy. Even centre–left politician Raphaël Glücksmann, in a public speech in March, put on his Gaullist cape and asked the US to '[g]ive us back the Statue of Liberty' because of 'Americans who have chosen to switch to the side of the tyrants' (quoted in Cohen 2025). De Gaulle was always sceptical about the extent to which NATO's Allied Command was under US rule. He constantly strove for France's military sovereignty, an effort that finally led to French military forces leaving the Allied Command Structure (although not NATO itself). He believed that the polarisation of the world during the Cold War would become a threat in the future. He argued that the balance between the two nuclear superpowers—which at that time was an important factor for world peace—could change in the future and that Russia and the US, while being careful not to directly attack one another, could crush others, with 'Western Europe being obliterated from Moscow and Central Europe from Washington' (de Gaulle 1959, author's translation). Like Cassandra, de Gaulle vainly hoped that his warnings would jolt his peers out of their comfort and motivate them to act. But the encompassing influence and control of the US did not bother the European NATO members, who were more worried about internal post–Second World War politics. Several critics argued that de Gaulle was mainly motivated by the hope of keeping alive what remained of the French colonial possessions, a sentiment fed by the humiliation brought on by Suez Canal Crisis and the Algerian War fiasco (Korlinov and Afonshina 2019).

Whether his feelings were hurt by the US in Egypt or his ego was bruised when he was asked to participate in the war in Vietnam (formerly French Indochina), de Gaulle's idealistic concept of a European common defence agreement is now more popular than ever.

A little-known character in the *Iliad* is Cassandra's brother, Helenus, who also possessed the gift of prophecy. Accounts of how he obtained this gift vary since the tale was modified through the years—one of the perks of composing a transgenerational epic poem orally? But what is most important about Helenus is that he could see the future and be believed. He advised Hector to challenge any Achaean soldier to a duel in order to impress the Greek army; he accompanied the Trojan forces that made the Greeks retreat to the beaches; and he even foresaw the founding of Rome by Aeneas, according to Virgil in the *Aeneid*. In the end, however, he could not prevent the fall of Troy.

If we are sticking to mythological comparisons, then welcome to the age of Helenus reincarnated—this time as Emmanuel Macron. Unlike his mythological sister Cassandra (and his predecessor de Gaulle), Macron's warnings about Europe's dependence on NATO have not gone unheard. In fact, they have stirred up real debate, from national parliaments to the EU bubble. His 2019 diagnosis of NATO as 'brain-dead' (*The Economist* 2019) remains a high point of theatrical prophecy. As Alain Duhamel quipped, 'Putin and Trump have resuscitated de Gaulle' (quoted in Cohen 2025)—though what we got is not quite Cassandra reborn, but something more eccentric: Helenus in a designer suit, juggling oracles and EU Council conclusions like briefing notes.

Unlike Cassandra, who was doomed never to be believed, Macron has the gift of 'TED Talk prophecy'. He is coherent and confident. But while he receives a moderate amount of applause, his ideas are never really acted upon.

Cassandra foresaw the fall of Troy and was ignored. Helenus foresaw the rise of Rome and was believed. Macron speaks of a sovereign Europe and receives a politely worded press release in return. Perhaps Cassandra's real tragedy was not just that no one listened—but that even when her brother was heard, history marched on undeterred. The future, it seems, is easier to foresee than to shape—especially when every prophecy must be translated into 27 languages, negotiated by 27 governments and approved by a presidency that changes every 6 months. Maybe what Europe really needs is not another prophet in a suit but a shared sense of purpose powerful enough to outlast the news cycle—and the Council's coffee break.

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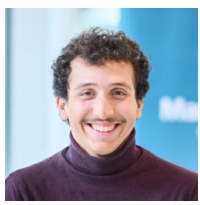
Author biography



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