SPECIAL REPORT

A certain idea

President Macron wants France to play a bigger part in Europe

That crucial Franco-German axis will matter even more

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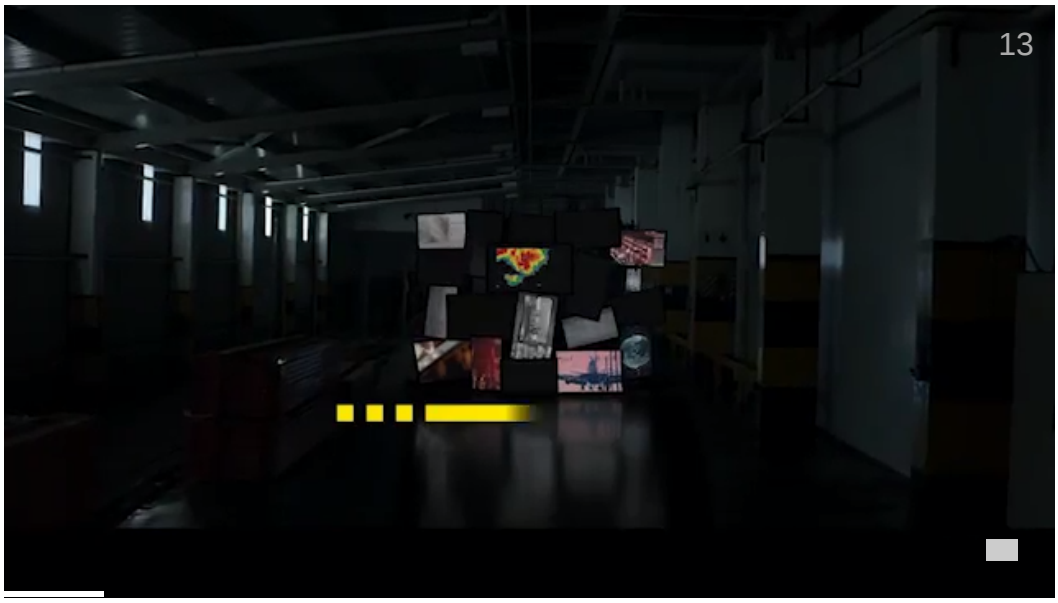
"IN EVERY BEGINNING dwells a certain magic." Germany's Angela Merkel quoted these lines from a poem by Hermann Hesse when she welcomed Mr Macron to Berlin the day after his inauguration. The doyenne of European leaders, she was by then on her fourth French president, having worked first with Mr Chirac in 2005. The link with her second, Mr Sarkozy, was volatile; with Mr Hollande, lopsided. The election of Mr Macron, who praised Germany for "rescuing our collective dignity"

during the refugee crisis and whose supporters waved EU flags at rallies, came as a relief and a source of promise.

In his first three months Mr Macron met Ms Merkel nine times, more than twice as often as America's and Italy's leaders, and three times more than Russia's and Britain's. This reflects a return to the traditional European reflex of French presidents during the Fifth Republic. It was General de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer, his German counterpart, who established the Franco-German link as the driving force of Europe when they met in 1963 to sign a treaty under the crystal chandeliers of the Elysée Palace. "My heart overflows and my soul is grateful," averred the general, adding that the treaty "opens the door to a new future for Germany, for France, for Europe and therefore for the world".



Mr Macron would probably echo that sentiment. He twice took his election campaign to Germany. His finance minister is a fluent German-speaker. His prime minister was educated at the French Lycée in Bonn. His diplomatic adviser, Philippe Etienne, was formerly ambassador to Berlin. Whatever the question in Europe, the first answer for Mr Macron seems to be Germany.

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It is clear what Mr Macron seeks from the "new deal" he hopes to reach with his neighbour. He summed it up three years ago: "€50bn of spending cuts for us; €50bn of investment for them." A fuller version goes something like this: France restores its lost credibility in German eyes by sticking to its promises to curb the budget deficit and reform the economy; in return, Germany supports closer integration of the 19-member euro zone, with more fiscal convergence and joint investment, some form of common budget, a finance minister and a parliament.

Mr Macron's first step is to keep to his word at home. "He will surprise them, because the Germans don't believe it will happen," says an adviser. "They have been disappointed by France too many times before." It will take some time before judgment in Berlin firms up and the new German government settles. But once they start talking seriously, the hard part will begin. A foretaste was provided by the cover of *Der Spiegel*, a German weekly, just days after the French election. It featured Mr Macron under the heading "Teurer Freund"—which can mean either dear or expensive friend. When France talks about more risk-sharing, Germany hears bigger bills to pay. When Germany insists on more control and rules, France hears refusal to accept solidarity. As a frequent visitor, Mr Macron knew Germany well enough not to push too soon. He took care to start with less controversial matters, such as the protection of external borders, before pressing for new euro-zone institutions. But his underlying strategy is clear: the more reason that France can give Germany to trust it, the more it can hope to get from Berlin.

Mr Macron senses an unusual—and probably brief—opportunity for Europe to fashion a stronger centre and stand up for itself in the world. In this respect, he can sound almost impatient with his mighty neighbour. "Germany is faced with a real choice: whether it wants a European model with a German hegemony which isn't durable, because it rests in part on courageous reforms that Germany did a dozen

years ago, and in part on the imbalances in the euro zone…or whether Germany wants to participate with France in a new European leadership which rebalances Europe, with more solidarity and also a project of stronger convergence." He has no illusions about the price of failure. The choice, he judges, is about whether liberal democratic politics can prevail, and whether Europe can hold together.

Most world leaders do not fret much about their place in history until towards the end of their tenure. Unusually for a young first-time president, Mr Macron already seems to be pondering it. He chose to place a copy of de Gaulle's memoirs, together with a ticking clock, in the background of his official portrait. Behind his outwardly sunny disposition there is both a single-mindedness and an inner solemnity about him. With America's president, Donald Trump, tempted by isolation and morally adrift, Britain in retreat and illiberal powers on the continent's doorstep, Mr Macron sees this as Europe's moment to reassert itself and its values as a guarantor of the democratic liberal order, but also as a place that secures decent lives for its people. "Europe needs to wake up. We need to stop holding crisis summits around hyper-technical subjects…We need to define another horizon together. We can be the leaders of tomorrow's world."

As Mr Macron's presidency unfolds, there are bound to be misunderstandings, quarrels and disappointments. He wants a Europe "of different speeds", centred on the euro zone. Yet countries outside the currency area will resent being treated as second-class. His focus on the Franco-German relationship risks sidelining the rest, whether old friends or newer members in eastern Europe. He will rattle some with his call for a "Europe that protects". To northern European ears, this smacks of old-style French protectionism and cuts against the principles of the EU's single market. When Mr Macron's government nationalised a French shipyard this summer, albeit temporarily, in order to thwart an Italian takeover, he caused dismay not only in Rome but also in other European capitals. Maybe, muttered some, the new president is not as European as he professes to be. Mindful of such risks, Mr Macron has since taken a tour of eastern European capitals, which France has too often ignored, and invited Italy and Spain to join France and Germany at a summit in Paris.

To make sense of Mr Macron's views on Europe, it is best to avoid casting him as an Anglo-Saxon liberal. That he calls himself liberal at all is courageous in France (Mr

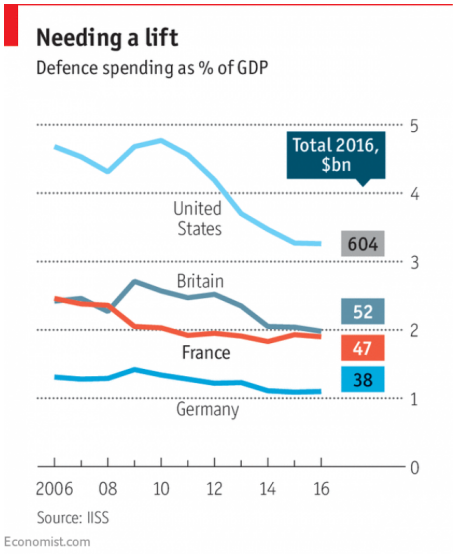
Chirac once described liberalism as a greater threat to Europe than communism). During his campaign Mr Macron made the case for globalisation and free trade, whereas Ms Le Pen promised to put up barriers and shut out foreign competition. But "he is not the product of a liberal intellectual tradition," says Mathieu Laine, a liberal analyst, friend and early backer of his presidential bid. "His roots are on the progressive centre-left that reconciled itself to the market economy."

Capitalism edged in pink

"I believe in the market economy, the open world," explains Mr Macron, "but we need to rethink regulation, so as to deal with the excesses of globalised capitalism." Right or wrong, he judges such excesses to be behind Britain's vote for Brexit. This directly informs his vision of the EU. "Europe is not a supermarket," he declared in June. "He believes that if you want to keep a society open, you have to protect it," says an adviser. The president fears that, unless Europe can offer security to its citizens as well as open up opportunities for them, political extremism will win the day and Europe will fail.

If he gets it right, he could reap big dividends. Germany needs a stronger France to help share the burden of EU leadership. Both countries fret about Mr Trump's disdain for NATO and want to strengthen European defence co-operation. Post-war Germany has never been comfortable with the idea of being Europe's sole leader, and remains tentative about using force abroad. Britain is distracted by self-inflicted difficulties. If Brexit goes ahead as planned, France, a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear power, will be the EU's only member with military muscle. Despite a squeeze on military spending, Mr Macron plans to raise the defence budget to 2% of GDP by 2025. With luck, he could look forward to a second term and a big role in Europe.

It is too early to judge how Mr Macron might be able to project such influence. He is deft at using diplomatic symbols, inviting Mr Putin to Versailles, while making it clear that he will be no pushover. But he is new to foreign and security policy, and untested as commander-in-chief. "He doesn't want to lock himself into a doctrine, which is a good thing," says François Heisbourg, of the Foundation for Strategic Research, a think-tank.



Mr Macron's emerging diplomacy seems to rest on pragmatism: a belief in keeping the door open to all-comers, even unsavoury ones, on the premise that isolation breeds even greater danger. Mr Macron rejects what he calls "neo-conservatism": the idea that Western powers can impose democracy and the rule of law on authoritarian sovereign states. He calls the intervention in Libya in 2011 a "historic error". And he believes ardently that France can recover a global voice and maintain a capacity to back it with force. He watched with dismay as the West failed to punish Syria for using chemical weapons in 2013. If Syria does so again on his watch, he warns, he will act unilaterally.

France has entered territory that is both promising and uncharted. There is no guarantee of success. Mr Macron is bound to disappoint some and upset others. His resolve will be tested as people wake up to uncomfortable change and his popularity drops further. His parliamentary novices will occasionally stumble. The future of LRM as a party remains fragile. Yet the broad direction is right. By sticking to it, Mr Macron could begin to remove some of the historic shackles on growth in France, and in Europe more broadly.

Those inclined to carp at the young president's mistakes might also take a look at the cast of career politicians who were swept aside by his bold advance, and recall how close to darkness the country came. Getting it right in France, a proud and volatile nation, is never simple. But the omens have seldom been as favourable, nor the stakes as high. If Mr Macron fails, the odds will be on a President Mélenchon or Le Pen in 2022, and a disintegrating Europe. That is why he is his country's, and his continent's, best hope.

This article appeared in the Special report section of the print edition under the headline "A certain idea"

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