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France’s rhetorical offensive on the war in Ukraine

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During a visit to the Czech Republic on 5 March, President Emmanuel Macron reiterated his position that sending troops from Western countries to Ukraine could not be ruled out. He suggested that the Russian-Ukrainian war is “our war”. He also called on his country’s allies to deliver a “strategic surge”, saying that a time was approaching in Europe when it would not be possible to behave in a cowardly manner, while he also warned against defeatism.

On 7 March, Macron met the leaders of the parties represented in the parliament. According to the participants, he declared that as Russia threatens to break through the frontline, there should no longer be any “red lines” in supporting Ukraine, because direct intervention by Western countries could be necessary to save its statehood. These talks came ahead of a parliamentary debate on the French-Ukrainian agreement on security cooperation, which will take place over the next few days.

The signals of a significant change in France’s attitude towards the war in Ukraine had started coming earlier: on 26 February, at Macron’s initiative, a meeting of heads of state and government on supporting Ukraine was held in Paris. At the following press conference, the president confirmed that talks were underway on the possible deployment of NATO members’ troops to Ukrainian territory, and refused to rule out this possibility. He justified his position by the need to create a situation of strategic ambiguity in order to complicate the Russian government’s decision-making.

Several countries, including Lithuania, Estonia and Canada, have backed the French leader’s remarks. In contrast, Chancellor Olaf Scholz has firmly ruled out the participation of German troops in any operations in Ukraine. The governments of the UK, the US, Poland and other countries have responded in a similar fashion. The French foreign ministry has clarified that France has no plans for its troops to join the fighting against Russia, and that any Western troops deployed in Ukraine could perform training or support functions.

Commentary

- Macron has been gradually hardening his rhetoric towards Russia since the June 2023 conference in Bratislava, where he admitted that the Central European countries had been right in their diagnosis of the security situation. This shift stems from a sense that the earlier policy of dialogue with Russia, including his attempts to talk to Vladimir Putin in the first months of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, had been ineffective. Several developments can be seen as the direct causes of the French leader’s latest remarks, including the Ukrainian forces’ worsening position on the battlefield and the uncertainty

in transatlantic relations, ahead of the US presidential election in November and following the Congress's failure to pass the 2024 aid package. The tougher rhetoric towards Russia and the introduction of the term 'strategic ambiguity' (which is used in the context of France's doctrine of nuclear deterrence) are also intended to reaffirm France's ambition to take greater responsibility for European security.

- Another important context is the crisis in French-German relations, for which the French side has increasingly blamed Chancellor Scholz personally. From France's perspective, Germany's refusal to send its long-range Taurus missiles to Ukraine in a situation where France, the UK and the US have provided similar missiles represents an act of disloyalty from its key ally. The French government is also displeased that several German politicians and diplomats have reproached France for its modest military aid to Ukraine compared to Germany's (hence France's disclosure of its true scale: see below).
- The suggestion that Western troops could be sent to Ukraine is meant to reaffirm France's determination to safeguard independent Ukrainian statehood in the event that the frontline collapses. Mentioning the possible deployment of Western troops is also designed to complicate the Kremlin's calculus should it decide to ramp up its military operations from the border with Belarus or launch such operations against Moldova. On 7 March, France and Moldova signed a defence agreement in Paris which provides for the establishment of a French military mission in Chisinau to train the Moldovan military. This move, as well as a statement signed by Macron and Moldova's President Maia Sandu, can be seen as a signal from France that it has taken responsibility for maintaining Moldova's independence.
- The French leader's remarks came shortly after the two countries signed an agreement on bilateral security cooperation (see '*The West and Ukraine: agreements on security cooperation*'). In this document, France disclosed the value of its military aid (€3.8 billion in 2022–23) for the first time, and pledged that it would continue in 2024 with funds of up to €3 billion. While signing this agreement has been important, the scale of France's existing and planned military support for Ukraine still lags behind that provided by other major NATO countries, which partly stems from the French ground forces' limited stocks of equipment and ammunition. In this context, the options for sending French troops to Ukraine are limited, and the credibility of the concept of 'strategic ambiguity' can be called into question. This situation could change if France increased its aid substantially, decided to boost the numbers and capabilities of its own ground forces, and built a coalition of countries willing to deploy a military contingent to Ukraine under the right conditions.
- Macron's words should also be interpreted through the prism of domestic politics. The parliamentary debate on the defence cooperation agreement with Ukraine is designed to sharpen the divide between the pro-Russian forces, represented by the far left and far right, and those which support democracy and a rules-based international order, such as Macron's own Renaissance party. However, making the issue of a possible French military presence in Ukraine a part of this discussion is risky as the vast majority of the population is currently opposed to such a move. The president could change these attitudes if he can make a convincing case for taking such a step while detailing to the public the scale of Russia's actions against France and its allies, which range from its

activity in Africa to operations in cyberspace. The atmosphere of outrage towards the Kremlin following the murder of Alexei Navalny could work in Macron’s favour.