



## The new European power structure

Macron wishes to sew a fresh tapestry, and Britain should be content to have a role in it



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On my very last day as editor of the Daily Telegraph, we by ill chance published, in the City pages, a potential libel of a French businessman. The man began proceedings. Under French law, I had to go to Paris in person for some formalities in front of a judge. "Oh," he said, looking at my file. "I see you were born in Hastings. My condolences for the battle."

Monsieur le juge was touching lightly on a point that has always slightly confused me. Born in Hastings, growing up and still living near Battle, I feel it natural to say that "we" lost in 1066, defeated by "them". The French judge, looking from the other side, clearly thought the same. Yet, I am also aware that this doesn't really make sense. "We" — our country today and even (though the word has an ethnic meaning) England — are an entity shaped in very considerable part by the Norman conquest. "We" and "they" are commingled forever. So when French President Emmanuel Macron week before last announced that he would be lending us his Bayeux Tapestry [The tapestry is a 70-metre long embroidered cloth that graphically depicts the Norman build-up and success in the Battle of Hastings in 1066; it shows how William the Conqueror crossed the Channel to seize the English crown from King Harold], we can feel at the same time touched by this generous gesture of kinship and slightly needed by being reminded of an English defeat.

This ambivalent reaction expresses the centuries-old relationship between our two countries, in which comity and competitiveness are inextricably mixed. I bet Macron feels it himself. "We are making a new tapestry together," he declared, as he sat next to British Prime Minister Theresa May at their press conference last Thursday. She looked characteristically un-warm at the thought. No doubt he genuinely wants to weave a rich tapestry which includes both our countries, but does the Napoleonic gleam in this bantam cock's eye suggest that he also wants, as you might say, to stitch us up?

Macron has been doing some very showy diplomacy. He gave a horse to the President of China, Xi Jinping, in its Year of the Horse. He had Russian President Vladimir Putin to Versailles, 300 years after Peter the Great had made the same trip, and United States President Donald Trump to the July 14 celebrations. He is making best use of his extraordinary electoral success last year — and of the fact that he has the glamour of being a head of state, rather than just a head of government. Slightly preposterously, he is reviving the claim to world leadership that France never abandoned, though it has been unsupported by the facts since 1815. It is so much more fun to be entertained by the President of the Republic than to be presented with a couple of dingy Victorian prints of the Houses of Parliament by May. A part of this diplomatic offensive, Macron correctly perceives, is to take advantage of Britain's temporary embarrassments. Since we are busy Brexiting, there is less we can do on other fronts. Alone in Western Europe, Britain and France are nuclear powers with seats on the United Nations Security Council. France is using this moment, in that forum, to upstage Britain and to present herself to the world as the leader that speaks for the whole of Europe. It is a trick, perhaps, but a trick worth taking. If the roles were reversed, Britain would do the same.

This should not lead us to think that Macron has any ideological desire to punish Britain for leaving the European Union (EU). Unlike Michel Barnier and Jean-Claude Juncker, he is not part of the EU's Spanish Inquisition, seeking to root out heresy by means of torture. He merely wants, reasonably enough, to extract whatever is best for France. He thinks what is best for France is to cling tightly to the single market while at the same time not wanting London's financial dominance to collapse. French businesses need the expertise and the deep liquidity of the City of London's capital markets. A rich Britain is better for France than a poor one. Close to the wire, he will want a Brexit deal, not a breakdown, seeking to slice off a bit of financial migration for Paris as he goes. More broadly, Macron wants to solve the great European conundrum. At the end of the Cold War, nearly 30 years ago, former French president Francois Mitterrand made the miscalculation that a single currency (today's euro) would tie down a reunited Germany. Instead — as former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher had warned him would happen — it allowed Germany to emerge as by far the greatest power in continental Europe. A humiliated Russia turned sour. France went into eclipse, at its darkest under the inept presidency of Francois Hollande, from which Macron is now trying to rescue it. Today, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel has overreached and stayed too long, Macron is behaving in a way that forces one to use French words such as *eclat* (glow) and *elan* (momentum). While she, in her declining political years, has spent months in stodgy negotiations about coalition, he has pushed labour market reform through a so-far compliant Chamber of Deputies and staged various "Sun King" spectacles that may prompt some satirical guffaws over here, but seem to create a good impression in the wider world.

Macron's idea of the EU's future is a mixture of the pragmatic and the visionary. Accepting the fact of an inner and outer ring, he wishes to deepen the inner and licence the greater freedom of the outer. The former would be most of the Eurozone, finally locked into a common economic government. The latter would be a much looser thing drawn together by "European values". Macron would be pleased if Britain went back on her Brexit vote and rejoined the outer ring, but he doesn't mind much if we don't. After all, our withdrawal is making it much easier to push the inner-circle integration he seeks. His greater EU problem is the increasing rebelliousness of countries such as Poland and Hungary, who are not mad about politically correct "European values" and refuse their Brussels-imposed quotas of immigrants.

Where Britain does matter to Macron's "new tapestry" of Europe is in defence and security. Although the French, unlike the British, pay lip service to ideas of a European army, they don't actually want it. They agreed to a Franco-German corps but, in practice, sabotaged it. French and British defence and security cooperation, however, is much deeper — for example, in intelligence against Russia and against terrorism, and in links between the two countries' special forces. As Sir Richard Dearlove, the former head of MI6, put it in an "open letter" to President Macron last month: "No two European nations have worked together more closely in these most sensitive areas where special levels of trust are necessary and exercised daily." The fact that May and Macron signed what the French President rather grandly called a "treaty" at Sandhurst was more than a nod to that thought. May is not used to Macronic big ideas. Her political style is much more modest and parliamentary. Anyway she is buried in the problems of the moment. But she should feel all right about having a role in the new European tapestry that Macron hopes to sew. If Britain seeks European security without European entanglements, performs a mid-Atlantic role for Nato and helps France to defend the continent against a revanchist Russia, well, that is a sensible, traditional role for these islands.

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