
Macron's Taiwan comments expose muddled China policy

Desire for European third way overshadowed by message of autonomy from U.S.

SHOGO AKAGAWA, MADOKA KITAMATSU and MAILYS PENE-LASSUS, Nikkei staff writers
April 27, 2023 20:38 JST

LONDON/PARIS -- French President Emmanuel Macron's call for Europe to steer clear of a Taiwan conflict -- rooted in France's pride and deep-seated resistance to following America's lead -- has raised questions about where he and Paris really stand on China.

The furor started in early April, during an interview on Macron's flight back from China. Speaking about a hypothetical crisis over Taiwan, he said: "The worse thing would be to think that we Europeans must become followers on this topic and take our cue from the U.S. agenda and a Chinese overreaction."

Official readouts of a call last week between Macron and U.S. counterpart Joe Biden also showed a striking difference in attitude. The White House statement said the two had "reaffirmed the importance of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait."

But the French side did not name Taiwan directly, mentioning only the leaders' "determination" to "uphold international law, including the freedom of navigation, throughout the Indo-Pacific."

The timing was poor. Macron had just recently returned from a state visit to Beijing, accompanied by a sizable delegation of business leaders, where President Xi Jinping had rolled out the red carpet.

The French leader has faced a fusillade of criticism amid a growing view in Europe and the U.S. that he has been co-opted by China.

If Europe is "not going to pick sides between the U.S. and China over Taiwan, then maybe we shouldn't be picking sides, either," and leave Ukraine to Europe, U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio said in a video on Twitter.

Yet people around Macron believe that he has not been taken in by Beijing, but simply said directly what he really thinks.

The president has championed European autonomy, seeing European integration as a means to stand up to world powers like the U.S., China and Russia. This line of thinking reflects the legacy of Gaullism -- the political philosophy of former French leader Charles de Gaulle, who sought to keep the Anglo-Saxon U.S. and U.K. at arm's length while promoting European interests.

And France is fiercely proud of its diplomatic clout. As a nuclear-armed state and permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, it subconsciously perceives itself on the same level as the U.S. and China.

Some European diplomatic sources see Macron's flaunting of Paris' stature as a way to stoke public pride and turn attention away from pension reforms pushed through by the president that have fueled mounting unrest.

Some observers see Macron's diplomatic assertiveness as an effort to draw attention from public anger over unpopular pension reforms. © Reuters
Macron meant to convey that he seeks a third way that isn't swayed by either the U.S. or China -- not to stress that Paris would not bow to Washington. Taiwanese Deputy Legislative Speaker Tsai Chi-chang, who recently visited France, told Nikkei that he "sensed no change in the Taiwan-France relationship."

But whether, in avoiding criticism of Beijing while sounding skeptical of Washington, the French leader sent the right message to authoritarian-leaning China is questionable.

The controversy comes at a time when unity among democracies is being tested.

"We need to deny the interpretation that France is distancing itself from the U.S. and moving closer to China," French Sen. Olivier Cadic, who represents French citizens living abroad, told Nikkei.

France was among the earliest European countries to come out with an Indo-Pacific strategy. Yet "its policy on China is ill-defined," said Marc Julienne, head of China research at the French Institute of International Relations. Some observers suspect that Macron is putting economic interests first.

The French navy has dispatched a frigate near Taiwan as a check against China. The inconsistency between this move and the president's remarks reveals that the government is not all on the same page on China policy.

Macron previously caused a stir in 2019 when he spoke of the "brain death of NATO." His view then that Europe should set itself apart from the U.S. and act on its own is of a piece with his thinking now. This risks emboldening authoritarian states that perceive a rift between America and Europe.

The French military's moves in the Indo-Pacific appear to be an odd fit with Macron's call for a hands-off approach on Taiwan. © Reuters
The French leader's efforts to earn points through diplomacy are, ironically, becoming a diplomatic liability. "His comments have gotten attention, but they don't have the power to sway Europe as a whole," a senior European official said.

Despite what Macron has said, the European Union would very likely impose economic sanctions on China in the event of a Taiwan crisis, and it could conceivably supply Taipei with weapons. Though Macron's views on European autonomy resonate with many European countries, it is clear which of the U.S. or China matters to them more.

Germany is grateful to Washington for the defeat of the Nazis and for encouraging the reunification of East and West Germany. Eastern Europe needs American military might as a bulwark against Russia.

And there is a growing suspicion of Beijing. China's ambassador to France recently questioned the sovereignty of former Soviet states, drawing an outraged response from the three Baltic countries.

France says it is the only EU member with territory and a permanent military presence in the Indo-Pacific. As such, it should take a more active hand in security in the Far East. If the significance of what Macron says starts to come into doubt, the consequences for both France and Europe as a whole could be irrevocable.