

Macron's call to send soldiers: Navigating French debate and European discord through the lens of history

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In a challenging backdrop for Ukraine, following its unsuccessful counteroffensive last summer, shortages of ammunition and manpower, Russia appears to have shifted the balance of power. Recognizing the evolving situation, Macron is calling for greater involvement in the region not only for Ukraine, but for the European stability.

French President Emmanuel Macron's recent proposition to potentially deploy soldiers¹ has ignited a fervent debate not only within France but also across Europe, revealing stark divisions reminiscent of historical conundrums. This proposal, amid escalating tensions with Russia and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, has evoked varied reactions, shedding light on contrasting perspectives and raising profound questions about European security and historical parallels. Indeed, The NATO Secretary-General denied any plans to deploy combat troops², while the Baltic countries, Poland, and Ukraine, with their firsthand experience of Russian aggression, express support for decisive action and praised Macron for his courageous and realistic proposal.

Beyond the strategic and communication debates stirred by Macron's proposition, which has highlighted divisions at a crucial moment for European unity, it has undeniably ignited a deep-rooted debate in France. This discussion delves into the pressing question of the commitments we may soon be faced with.

Central to this discourse are two divergent historical perspectives, each offering insights into the complexities of contemporary geopolitics.

Prioritizing Diplomacy: Lessons from Jaurès in Ukraine Crisis Resolution

The first perspective, reminiscent of Jean Jaurès' stance in 1914³, emphasizes diplomatic solutions and détente to prevent the escalation of conflicts. Jaurès, a staunch advocate for peace, believed in the power of dialogue and negotiation to avert the horrors of war. In applying this perspective to the current situation, proponents advocate for multilateral diplomacy and international cooperation as the primary means to resolve the crisis in Ukraine, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of militarization and fostering lasting peace. Adding to this perspective, the deployment of soldiers in Ukraine would render any diplomatic attempts to resolve the conflict obsolete and risk entangling Europe in an unending war.

But can reasonable negotiations with Putin still be on the table today?

¹ Chastand Jean-Baptiste, Macron defends idea of potentially sending troops to Ukraine as allies distance themselves, *Le Monde*, February 28.

² Lipika Pelham ; Lou Newton,

Nato allies reject Emmanuel Macron idea of troops to Ukraine, *BBC news*, February 28.

³ July 25, 1914: Jean Jaurès' final speech against the war

Learning from history: risks of appeasement in facing Russian expansion

The specter of the *Munich Conference* of 1938 looms large in the second perspective, highlighting the dangers of appeasement and the perils of failing to confront aggression⁴. The Munich Agreement, often criticized as a failed policy of appeasement, saw European powers, including Britain and France, conceding to Adolf Hitler's demands for the annexation of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia in hopes of avoiding war. However, this compromise only emboldened Hitler, leading to further aggression and eventually World War II. Drawing parallels to the current situation in Ukraine, critics of Macron's proposal warn against similar complacency. They emphasize that any reluctance to confront Russian aggression and expansionism, as witnessed in Georgia, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, could embolden President Putin further. Such appeasement, they argue, poses a significant threat to European security and stability, potentially setting the stage for broader conflicts in the region.

Divided views and diverse voices: navigating Europe's stance on Ukraine amid Macron's proposal

Public opinion within France and across Europe reflects a complex division. According to a recent IPSOS/Euronews survey involving nearly 26,000 participants from 18 EU countries, 36% of Europeans see Ukraine's aid as a priority, while an equal percentage views it as important but not a top priority⁵. Regional variations are notable: Nordic EU members, such as Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, are more vocal about prioritizing support for Ukraine, with 68%, 59%, and 57% respectively seeing it as a key issue. In contrast, Hungary, Greece, Romania, and Slovakia show less enthusiasm, with 47%, 45%, 48%, and 39% respectively viewing Ukraine's aid as a secondary matter. While some politicians and public figures in France express support for Macron's proposal, emphasizing the need for decisive action against Russian aggression, others voice concerns about the risks of military intervention.

Europe's far-right is also shaping the narrative. While leaders like Marine Le Pen⁶ and Georgia Meloni distanced themselves from pro-Russian stances, their historical ties with Russia remain contentious. Marine Le Pen, for instance, has faced scrutiny for accepting millions in campaign funds from Russia. Exploiting public uncertainty and concerns over rising living costs, they've redefined their anti-immigration rhetoric, differentiating between Ukrainian refugees and Muslim migrants. However, despite their rising influence, the far-right is internally divided on the issue of NATO's role, with many holding an ideological anti-Atlantic stance. This division underscores the broader debate on European security and historical responsibility, as questions about the relationship with NATO further complicate their stance on negotiating or confronting Russian aggression.

⁴ The Munich Agreement - archive, *The Guardian*, September 1938.

⁵ Sergio Cantone, Should the EU continue to support Ukraine?, *Euronews*, March 28.

⁶ Romain Geoffroy, What are Marine Le Pen's ties to Vladimir Putin's Russia?, *Le Monde*, April 21, 2022.

It's not only the far-right but also certain left-wing parties that view NATO as an obstacle to negotiation. This perspective adds another layer of complexity to the discourse on European security, highlighting divergent views within the political spectrum.

Beyond the realm of geopolitics, this debate also invites reflection on the nature of power, morality, and historical responsibility. How do we reconcile the imperative to uphold peace with the need to confront aggression? What lessons can we draw from history, and how do we apply them to navigate the complexities of the present moment?

As Macron's proposal sparks introspection and debate, it serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring relevance of history and the imperative to learn from its lessons. Whether through diplomatic overtures or resolute deterrence, the ultimate goal should remain the same: to safeguard peace and stability.