What did Macron Tell Biden?

‘This is not how you treat allies’ was, as various media reports in the US and Europe show, the message that the French leader gave to the US President Joe Biden during the former’s recent visit to the US. The message is a continuation of the logic i.e., Europe’s growing discomfort with US geopolitics, that underpinned the German Chancellor’s recent visit to China, which he undertook despite US objections. Macron was a state visit to the US, yet the visit, although it came at a crucial historical juncture and he happened to be the first foreign leader on a state visit ever since Biden assumed the presidency, was shaped more by tensions within the alliance rather than any external tensions i.e., the ongoing Russian military operations in Ukraine or the possibility of a conflict with China around Taiwan. Today, there are more differences between the US and the EU than there have ever been in the past – especially since the end of the Second World War. Europe is clearly not happy with the US stance on the conflict in Europe. Despite the pomp and show of the visit, Macron did not mince words when he returned home. As he said in an interview with a French news channel:

“... one of the essential points we must address - as President Putin has always said - is the fear that NATO comes right up to its doors, and the deployment of weapons that could threaten Russia ... the topic will be part of the topics for peace, so we need to prepare what we are ready to do, how we protect our allies and member states, and how to give guarantees to Russia the day it returns to the negotiating table.”

This is precisely what Macron told Biden as well. This message is crucial for so many reasons. First, the message came from Europe’s top leader at the moment. The UK is marginalised within Europe because of Brexit. Rishi Sunak, the present British PM, took office only last month. The German Chancellor is yet to establish the kind of authority and influence that his predecessor, Angela Merkel, had. This leaves Macron pretty much in charge of the EU’s position. What he said, therefore, broadly reflects the European mindset.

Secondly, Macron’s message very clearly shows that Russia’s demands are legitimate and are not, as the US said last year, “non-starters” for any peace process. Macron made clear that these demands are an inevitable part of any upcoming peace talks. The disagreement between Europe and the US could not have been clearer. Thirdly, Russian demands are not isolated. They make a lot of sense to one of the most important players in the EU. In other words, western guarantees will involve diplomatic means of conflict resolution, which will make the military option less relevant. Finally, because the EU states can see why Russian demands make sense, Russia stands far from an ‘isolated’ state. Clearly, the US has many reasons to be disappointed with the EU.

The EU’s position flies directly in the face of projections about Russia becoming ‘weak’ through this conflict. If this was the matter, why would France care to address Russian demands? Clearly, such projections are for mass consumption whereas tensions – and disagreements – continue to brew within the Transatlantic Alliance. While many western pundits argue that the alliance is old and resilient enough, it is also a fact that it is too old now. That’s why it is fracturing internally.

Macron’s candid expression of these tensions was unmistakably clear, but did Biden understand it? His press conference alongside Macron shows he did not.

But someone else did understand. That person happens to be the German Chancellor, who held a phone call with Russia’s Vladimir Putin last Friday - a second consecutive call in two months, which stands markedly different from
Biden’s relentless criticism of Putin.

Let alone Germany, the message – which has been developing for the past many months in Europe and has been delivered only now – was understood in most of Europe. As the influential British magazine, The Economist said in a report in the last week of November that “American economic populism and geopolitical rifts threaten the long-run competitiveness of the European Union” and that, “it is not just the continent’s prosperity that is at risk, the health of the transatlantic alliance is, too”.

Macron’s message conveyed the falling health of the alliance, as most Europeans mainly blame the US, rather than Russia only, for the crisis now. If this was not the case, we would not have any crisis at all within the alliance. In other words, if there is anything ‘weak’ today, it is not Russia but the alliance supposed to counter Russia.

Consider this: on Friday (December 2, 2022), Thierry Breton, the official responsible for the EU’s internal market, pulled out of the meeting with the US to resolve what the CNN calls a “simmering dispute” between the EU and the US over Joe Biden’s Inflation Reduction Act. This act has become a source of conflict because of the way the Biden administration, by using billions of dollars in subsidies, is forcing electric car manufacturers to move to North America (USA, Canada, and Mexico). This puts the EU companies at a clear disadvantage.

While this dispute is not directly related to the military conflict in Europe, it does add to the list of disagreements – US gas sales to Europe, US weapon sales to Europe, disagreement on Russia’s security interests, disagreements on the US policy towards China – threatening the Transatlantic Alliance from within.

Is the US doing anything to reconcile? So far, the Biden administration has not offered any concession. That explains why Macron was critical of the situation, evident from the said quote from his interview with the French channel, even after his return from the US. Clearly, he did not get anything tangible from Biden, nor was he able to convince Biden to take Russian security interests as genuine. But the fact that Macron emphasised the importance of taking these interests as genuine and legitimate means that Biden was unable to convince Macron of the need for a long confrontation with Russia in Europe either. The Transatlantic stalemate is becoming stronger by the day - something that is healthy insofar as it is necessary for the world’s transition from the US-dominated unilateral global order to a multipolar global order.

**Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook.”**