

France's Macron flies to meet Putin in risky bid to avert war

KEY POINTS

—“It is indispensable to avoid a degradation of the situation before we build mechanisms and gestures of reciprocal trust [with Russia],” France’s President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview.

—Monday’s meeting in Moscow is extremely important for the French president, who has been pushing for a more independent European Union in terms of defense.

—Tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine have ramped up significantly in recent weeks.

France’s President Emmanuel Macron heads to Russia on Monday with one aim on his mind: Receiving assurances from Moscow that it will start to de-escalate tensions on the Ukrainian border.

“We will discuss the terms to de-escalate,” Macron told the French publication *Le Journal du Dimanche* ahead of his trip to Russia.

“One has to be realistic. We will not achieve unilateral gestures, but it is indispensable to avoid a degradation of the situation before we build mechanisms and gestures of reciprocal trust,” Macron added, according to a CNBC translation.

Tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine have ramped up significantly in recent weeks. The U.S., Germany, France and other NATO nations have raised concerns about Russian troop buildup on the border with Ukraine; while the Kremlin has denied claims that it is looking to invade its neighbor.

Moscow has sharply criticized NATO deployments in Eastern Europe in recent years and China has backed Russia, saying last week that it opposes further enlargement of the military alliance. The U.S. has already refused to concede to Moscow’s demands over Ukraine and NATO.

European leadership

Monday's meeting in Moscow is extremely important for the French president, who has been pushing for a more independent European Union in terms of defense, while he also faces elections in April when his current tenure ends.

"I have always had a deep dialogue with President Putin and it is our responsibility to build historic solutions. There is, I think, an openness from President Putin to achieve this," Macron told Le Journal du Dimanche.

The EU, which brings together 27 nations, does not have a common military capacity — instead it relies on NATO for defense matters, where the United States play a fundamental role in decision-making.

In this context, Macron has for several years looked at developing Europe's strategic military autonomy. But this has become an even bigger issue for Macron as France is in charge of the EU's rotating presidency until June.

"Paris wants to prioritize a European engagement strategy with Moscow — instead of a US-led one anchored in NATO," analysts at consultancy firm Eurasia Group said in a research note in late January.

"France's president also wants to show European leadership — instead of kowtowing to the US — as he campaigns for re-election," the analysts also said.

Berlin void?

Macron is still yet to announce that he is running for a second mandate in April's election, but opinion polls suggest he'll win the vote and continue at the helm of the French presidency for another five years. However, further Russian aggression in Ukraine may hurt his potential reelection campaign.

At the same time, Macron is also looking to fill some of the void left by Angela Merkel, the former chancellor of Germany, who finished 16 years in power in late 2021. Merkel had relatively close ties with the Kremlin, aided by her fluency in Russian.

After a change in government in Berlin last year, Germany has yet to find its footing when it comes to its relationship with Russia.

"The world is becoming more and more dangerous and Germany as the biggest European country and the strongest economic power cannot allow itself to stay

neutral,” Andrij Melnyk, the Ukrainian ambassador to Germany told CNBC’s Annette Weisbach Monday.

Source:

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