

# **“Beware the French bearing gifts”**

Rishi's fabled 'bromance' with Emmanuel Macron may well come with strings attached, according to author and former research director John Keiger in an affiliate article which we publish in full below.

While media headlines focussed on the personal chemistry between the two at their joint summit in March, almost nothing was said in relation to another on-going political project on which the UK will have to take a view.

The European Political Community (EPC) is the French President's dream child, designed to build bridges between the narrowly integrationist EU 27 and 'wider' Europe comprising 44 sovereign states, including the UK, which he says will usher in 'a new era of co-operation between democratic European states'.

Like all European political projects dreamt up by the French it sounds innocuous enough until it becomes a reality with all the impediments and compromises that go with it.

As things stand, the precise remit of the EPC is almost impossible to define. But history has a way of repeating itself and the EPC may become a 'staging post' for the UK to re-enter the EU at some point in the future under a more sympathetic government. We have been warned.

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**Britain's role in Macron's European  
Political Community**

**By John Keiger**

President Macron's European Political Community is potentially a major change in the architecture of European international relations. If not treated with caution it could progressively and surreptitiously enmesh Britain.

The Macron-Sunak 'bromance' summit on 10 March in Paris was strong on rhetoric associated with immigration and the renewed strength of Franco-British relations after the travails of Brexit. But it was remarkably silent on one important aspect dear to Emmanuel Macron: his plan first announced to the Strasbourg European Parliament on 9 May 2022 to create a European Political Community (EPC), which would include the United Kingdom.

Despite the EPC figuring prominently in the official joint communiqué of the 36<sup>th</sup> Franco-British summit, neither British nor French media made much play of it. And yet it is potentially a major change in the architecture of European international relations that if not treated with caution could progressively and surreptitiously enmesh Britain.

### ***Geographical scope of the EPC***

There is an unhelpful tendency for commentators, and in particular the European Union, to conflate the EU with geographical Europe. The first comprises 27 member states, but according to the United Nations, the second 44 sovereign states. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought home to the EU, and indeed to the UK, the usefulness of a forum to promote Europe-wide cooperation.

That the UK was no longer an EU member but played the prominent role in mustering diplomatic, financial and military

support for Kyiv from an early stage made precisely that point, as well as driving home the importance of the UK to European defence and security.

### ***Macron's brainchild***

But it was Emmanuel Macron who first came up with the EPC idea, explaining that: 'The EU, given its level of integration and ambition, cannot in the short term be the only way to structure the European continent.' For post-Brexit Britain the 'in the short term' is a warning of how the EPC could evolve. But for the moment Macron was happy to settle for a 'new area of cooperation' 'between democratic European states.'

At a meeting of European Union leaders in Brussels on 23 June the EPC was approved, though when the UK did so and how is less clear. The EU described the EPC as "to foster political dialogue and cooperation to address issues of common interest so as to strengthen the security, stability and prosperity of the European continent."

Macron insisted that a first meeting of the new forum be arranged quickly and that the Czech Republic, scheduled to hold the revolving presidency of the EU by then, host it on 6 October. 43 members, including the UK, Turkey and Ukraine, attended.

### ***Purpose and Function of EPC***

In truth, at this stage one can read into the EPC what one wishes. Member states hold differing views about its use and aim. "We already have the OSCE, NATO, EFTA, the Eastern Partnership and the partnership with the Western Balkans," remarked a northern EU member state diplomat. Others see it as the EU 'waiting room' for candidate states, such as the western Balkans. Then there is the suggestion that Macron – in

keeping with over a century of French diplomacy – conceives it as a structure capable of drawing Russia closer to Europe once the Ukraine war is over.

He also sees it as a sort of ‘sin bin’ for euro-sceptic EU members who refuse to toe the line and who could be relegated to the bench – a two-tier Europe. Meanwhile for Charles Michel, President of the European Council, the EPC aims to go ‘beyond enlargement’ to steer political dialogue and coordination for those that wish to join the EU and those that do not.

For Brussels the EPC can be seen in the light of the ambition for a ‘geopolitical Commission’ ‘that stabilises its neighbourhood, accelerates enlargement and champions multilateralism.’[ii] Many EU members such as the Nordic states, the Netherlands and Poland see it as a means of drawing closer to London after Brexit. According to *Le Monde* Britain’s prime minister at the time, Liz Truss, seized the invitation and even offered to host the next EPC (confirmed by Sunak for June 2024).

## ***Warning Signs for UK***

But she did pose one important condition: that the EPC bear no resemblance to EU institutions, that there be no permanent secretariat or fixed structure and that it merely be a forum for political dialogue. When she met President Macron in New York for the UN General Assembly in September 2022 she even requested – unsuccessfully – for the EPC to be renamed, as it conjured up the European Economic Community. Her proposal that the first meeting in Prague contain a round table on immigration was also rejected.

## ***Earlier Incarnations***

At the risk of charging President Macron with plagiarism the concept of an EPC has regularly surfaced in Europe. It has always been a French initiative. Although it has never firmly taken root, it has paved the way for further integration. In the midst of creating the still-born European Defence Community of May 1952, the European Coal and Steel Community was tasked with setting up a 'European Political Community' to coordinate the foreign policies of the six member states while moving towards a common market.

The concept resurfaced in the early 1960s with the Fouchet Plan for intergovernmental political coordination of Common Market states and then again at the beginning of the 1970s. Former French president François Mitterrand came up with a similar idea for a 'European confederation' at the end of the Cold War in 1991, as a forum to welcome the states of central and eastern Europe recently liberated from the Soviet yoke. Though never implemented, like its predecessors, it was a precursor to future European integration developments.

How far Macron will be able to push the concept is immaterial. French diplomats have been playing down the suggestion that the EPC is an EU-plus-plus club and playing up its inter-governmental nature. But the novice Rishi Sunak, should beware a Macron bearing gifts, for there will always eventually be a counterpart designed to enmesh in order better to control. Macron will be taking the long view and thinking beyond the Brexiteer Sunak to, for instance, a Starmer government.

Labour might be thankful for the EPC staging post, legitimised by the Conservatives, on the road to closer relations with the EU's formal institutions.

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**About the author:** John Keiger is a former Research Director in the Department of Politics and International Studies, Cambridge University and the biographer of Raymond Poincaré, France's President before, during and after the First World War

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