

International

New tests for Macron, May with first major military operations

A major escalation for French and British forces

PARIS: Shortly after coming to power last year, Emmanuel Macron mused to a friend about the role of president. "You go through stages," he said. "Innocence is not allowed." On Friday night, like British Prime Minister Theresa May, he ordered his first major military intervention. Early Saturday, French and British aircraft took part in a wave of strikes against Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad's regime in response to alleged chemical weapons attacks.

Though already active in a US-led coalition combating the Islamic State jihadist group in the region, the strikes against Assad represented a major escalation for French and British forces. Macron, who faces a battle with trade unions at home over rail reforms, was widely seen as facing the sternest test yet of his foreign policy and commander-in-chief mettle. "We cannot tolerate the normalization of the use of chemical weapons," he said in a statement on Saturday, adding that "the facts and the responsibility of the Syrian regime are not in doubt".

Red lines

Around the same time as he was musing about power to his friend Philippe Besson after his election victory last May, Macron also laid out a clear policy on using military force in Syria. In the same month, with Russian President Vladimir Putin at his side, Macron said that further use of chemical weapons in Syria would be a "red line" that would trigger a response.

Having said Thursday that he had "proof" that Assad was responsible—which is denied by the regime—analysts saw Macron as having no choice but to go ahead with strikes. "When you fix red lines, if you don't know how to make sure they are respected, you're choosing to be

weak," Macron told The Guardian newspaper last June. "That's not my choice." Many French officials still bristle as they recall how former US president Barack Obama had set a red line too over the use of chemical weapons in Syria, only to pull back at the last minute in 2013.

But in carrying through with his threat, Macron will be testing how far he can go against an intransigent Russia, which has denounced the strikes against Syria. Macron, who has made no secret of his ambitions for playing a key role in Middle East diplomacy, is heading to Washington for a state visit this month, before a visit with Putin in Russia in May. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Saturday that the Russia visit was still on despite the heightened tensions.

'Not taken lightly'

The Elysee Palace said the president wanted the UN Security Council to resume talks on Syria that Paris would "work seriously" with Russia. "The UN Security Council must now resume, in unity, the initiative on the political, chemical and humanitarian aspects in Syria, to ensure the protection of civilians and for the country to finally find

peace," it said in a statement on Saturday.

May spoke on the telephone to Macron and US President Donald Trump, her Downing Street office said, in which they agreed the strikes "had been a success". A spokeswoman said: "The prime minister welcomed the public support which had been given by fellow world leaders for the strong stand the UK, France and the United States had taken in degrading Syria's chemical weapons capability and deterring their use; defending global rules; and sending a clear message that the use of chemical



NANTES: A cyclist stands next to a sign reading 'Macron is mistaken' (in a play of word with mistaken-Trompe and Trump) during a joint protest of French SNCF railway workers and students in Nantes, western France. —AFP

For May, Syria crisis presents new headache



weapons can never become normalized." For May, whose time in office has been consumed by extracting her country from the European Union, the Syria crisis presents a new headache. British involvement in military interventions abroad is controversial in a country still haunted by its role in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. "There is no graver decision that a prime minister can take than to send service personnel into combat. It is a decision that I have not taken lightly," May told reporters on Saturday.

British lawmakers voted down taking military action against Damascus in 2013, in what was widely viewed as an assertion of parliamentary sovereignty on the use of force. But in an earlier statement Saturday, May said there was "no practicable alternative to the use of force", insisting it had been "right and legal" to go ahead, and without consulting MPs. A YouGov poll in The Times newspaper conducted this week found that 43 percent of voters oppose strikes in Syria, with 34 percent unsure and only 22 percent supportive. —AFP

News in brief

Air China flight diverted

BEIJING: An Air China flight was diverted yesterday after a male passenger brandishing a fountain pen held a crew member hostage, aviation authorities said. The flight left Changsha, capital of the central province of Hunan, at 8:40am en route to Beijing. It landed in Zhengzhou, the capital of neighboring Henan province, just over an hour later after the man threatened the crew member. "The incident was successfully dealt with by 1:17pm, and passengers and crew members are safe," according to a statement from the Civil Aviation Administration of China, which said a man used a pen as a threatening device. A photo posted by China News Service showed a handful of firefighters standing in front of a row of fire trucks outside Zhengzhou airport. —AFP

Israel destroys tunnel

JERUSALEM: Israel's army said yesterday it had destroyed a Hamas tunnel crossing from the Gaza Strip into its territory after more than two weeks of tension along the border of the Palestinian enclave. Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman said it was the longest and deepest Gazan tunnel discovered by Israel. The tunnel crossed into Israeli territory by several meters but did not yet have an exit point, military spokesman Jonathan Conricus told journalists. Israel destroyed the tunnel—which it said connected to several others within Gaza and could have been used for attacks—by filling it with material to make it inoperative. "We filled the tunnel with material that renders it useless for a very long period of time," Conricus said. Explosives were not used. —AFP

Montenegro holds poll

PODGORICA: The people of Montenegro began voting yesterday in polls expected to see pro-Western six-time former prime minister Milo Djukanovic elected as president of the tiny Balkan nation that is aspiring to join the EU. Having dominated politics in the former Yugoslav republic for nearly 25 years, Djukanovic stepped down as prime minister in October 2016. He announced his comeback bid last month. The 56-year-old economist wants to take the predominantly Orthodox country, a part of which has strong pro-Russia sympathies, into the European Union following its admission to NATO in 2017. If he wins the presidency, currently a ceremonial post, it is expected to become the real seat of power in the country of 620,000 people. —AFP

Timbuktu 'terror' attack

BAMAKO: A rocket and car bomb attack left one UN peacekeeper dead, a dozen wounded and another dozen French soldiers hurt at Timbuktu's airport area, Mali's security ministry said Saturday. "A terrorist attack targeted" France's Barkhan camp as well as UN troops stationed outside the northern Mali city during the afternoon, the ministry said on Facebook. A dozen rockets were fired at the two camps with gunmen dressed as UN blue helmets riding two vehicles rigged with bombs. "One of the vehicles exploded, while the second bearing the UN sign was halted," the statement said. The ministry said the latest casualty toll was one UN soldier dead, a dozen wounded, five of them seriously, and a dozen French soldiers also hurt. —AFP

Thousands march in Barcelona to protest jailing of separatists

BARCELONA: Thousands of people began marching in Barcelona yesterday to protest the jailing of nine Catalan separatist leaders facing trial on "rebellion" charges. Many chanted "Freedom for the political prisoners" as they massed on the Parallel Avenue, one of the city's main streets, wearing yellow scarves, sweaters or jackets—the color chosen to show solidarity with the jailed leaders. The march was called by a platform set up in March to "defend Catalan institutions" and "the rights and fundamental freedoms" of its citizens.

The protest was backed by the Catalan branches of Spain's two largest trade unions, the CCOO and the UGT, sparking unease among union members who oppose independence for the wealthy northeastern region. "There have been tensions (among unions members) just like in the rest of the Catalan society," the secretary general of the Catalan branch of UGT, Camil Ros, told AFP on Saturday on the eve of the march. "But it is not a separatist protest. It is time to build bridges and the Catalan problem cannot be solved through the courts but by dialogue and politics," he added.

'Manufacture separatists'

The demonstration comes ten days after a German court dismissed an extradition request for Catalonia's ousted separatist president Carles Puigdemont on grounds of rebellion and released him on bail. Spanish prosecutors last week handed over new information to Germany they hope will prove the use of violence which would justify the rebellion charge against Puigdemont and their extradition request. Puigdemont is also accused of misuse of public funds for staging an independence referendum in Catalonia on October 1 despite it having been ruled

In a stunning book, former FBI director sheds moral high ground for politics

WASHINGTON: James Comey, the FBI director fired by President Donald Trump last year over the Russia meddling investigation, has always worn his professionalism and principles on his sleeve. But with his new book, which describes the US president as a mercurial, congenital liar, Comey has plunged headfirst into Washington's noxious political pit and risked losing the moral authority that has long protected him. Other Federal Bureau of Investigation chiefs have published memoirs.

"A Higher Loyalty: Truth, Lies and Leadership," goes where no other has: an open assault on the authority of the leader of the world's most powerful nation. That is the game of Washington politicians and pundits, a world Comey disdains as a member of the elite guild of lawyer-bureaucrats from the Justice Department. "As I was quickly learning," he writes of one of his first times in the White House, in the early 2000s, "Washington was a city where everyone seemed to question other people's loyalties and motivations, most often when they weren't in the room."

Plunge into politics

Now the 57-year-old veteran federal investigator has readily joined that world. In doing so he has provided Republicans fodder to defend Trump. "I can't think of anyone who's done a better job of politicizing the FBI than he has in the last 36 to 48 hours," said Republican Congressman Trey Gowdy. "The writing

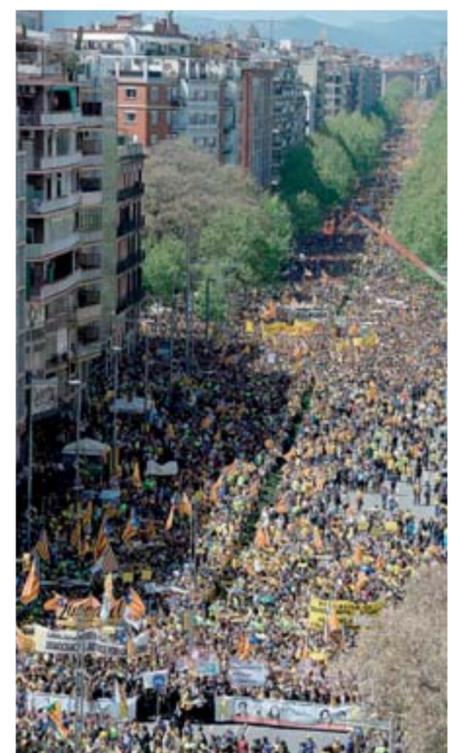
of the book in general and then some of the things that he's talking about are just frankly beneath the dignity of some really important offices he once held," he said on Fox News.

Washington national security lawyer Bradley Moss said Comey's claim to the moral high ground has always been weak. "Comey is not a saint. Never has been and I don't think anyone should have expected him to be," Moss wrote online. "He's made a name for himself in taking moral stands at critical political moments." While Comey supporters mostly held back from comment till they read the full book, which has not been officially released, some defended his credibility. Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told CNN he had "every confidence" in the accuracy of Comey's book. "I think it above all is a truthful portrayal of Jim's observations, his feelings and what occurred," Clapper said. And Moss added to his comments: "Comey is still infinitely more credible than the president."

Political limbo

Since October 16 the leaders of Catalonia's two largest pro-independence groups—Jordi Sanchez of the ANC and Jordi Cuixart of Omnium Jordi Cuixart have been in jail while they await their trial for rebellion. Prosecutors say the two men played central roles in orchestrating pro-independence protests in September in Barcelona which trapped national police inside a government building and destroyed their vehicles. They are also accused of mobilizing thousands of pro-independence supporters to prevent police from stopping the October 1 independence referendum from going ahead. "What makes me sad is the accusation of violence, which never existed," Sanchez said in December on Twitter.

He was elected as a lawmaker in snap polls in Catalonia in December and has been proposed two times as a candidate to lead a new Catalan regional government but a judge refused both times to allow him to leave jail to be sworn in. Six other Catalan separatist leaders are in jail in Spain for rebellion, along with Junqueras and the leaders of the grassroots separatist groups. Catalonia has been in political limbo since Spain's conservative central government imposed direct rule on the region after it unilaterally declared independence in October. Fresh regional elections will be triggered if a new leader is not elected by May 22. —AFP



BARCELONA: People march during a demonstration to support Catalan pro-independence jailed leaders and politicians yesterday. —AFP



WASHINGTON: These two photos show FBI Director James Comey (left) and US President Donald Trump. Trump launched into another Twitter tirade against James Comey yesterday, hours before the broadcast of an extended interview with the fired former FBI director about his interactions with the US president. —AFP

'Deep State' attacks

Comey might be better seen in the light of Washington Under Trump, where other top officials expected to fade into the background have instead become powerfully vocal anti-Trump forces: Clapper (a Comey pal) and former CIA directors Michael Hayden and John Brennan. They too have stunned Washington with their warnings of the dangers the president poses to the United States. That in turn stokes Trump's counter, which resonates through his conservative base, that he is being undermined by the unelected "Deep State." As Comey wrote, "What is happening now is not normal. It is not fake news, it is not okay." —AFP