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The French-American Alliance in an America-First Era

Jeff Lightfoot



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Cover photo: American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines lead the annual Bastille Day military parade down the Champs-Élysées in Paris, July 14, 2017. *Source:* DoD/Navy Petty Officer 2nd Class Dominique Pineiro.

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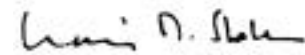
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FOREWORD

This new Atlantic Council report makes a compelling case that the US-France relationship may be heading into a new and more turbulent era under the leadership of Presidents Donald Trump and Emmanuel Macron. The fundamental question this report explores is whether the contrasting personalities and worldviews of these two presidents will put our transatlantic family back into conflict and rivalry and overturn a generation of strengthening bilateral relations. President Macron's late April state visit to the White House and address to a joint session of Congress will help us decipher the outlook for US-France relations in the years to come. I am confident we will find a partner who shares our vision and devotion to our alliance.

This report is not blind to some real downside risks that come with the changes we have seen over the last year on both sides of the Atlantic. It rather assesses them frankly and contextualizes them in a rich examination of the broader and longer-term changes we have witnessed: in American and French domestic politics, in our distinctly American and French debates about the role of our countries in the world, and in our wide-ranging cooperation on a host of challenges neither the United States nor France can meet alone. Yet the report also identifies opportunities to strengthen the alliance and points out that the bilateral alliance extends beyond the two presidents. Indeed, the people-to-people and commercial ties have always remained strong between our two nations, even when the political challenges are at their greatest.

The French-American Alliance in an America-First Era by Jeff Lightfoot makes an important contribution to the debate on how we take the invaluable partnership between the United States and France, and indeed the broader Atlantic alliance, forward during this period of uncertainty and turbulence. Its constructive, intellectually honest, and politically balanced approach very much reflects the Atlantic Council's strengths in this debate.



Ambassador Craig Stapleton
US Ambassador to France, 2005-2009

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THE FRENCH-AMERICAN ALLIANCE IN AN AMERICA-FIRST ERA

In late April 2018, President Donald Trump will host French President Emmanuel Macron for the first state dinner in the US president's term. At best, the media narrative will explore the curious personal friendship Trump and Macron have developed despite vast differences in personality and worldview. At worst, commentary will focus on the attire worn at the dinner, the winner of the handshake battle between the two presidents, and a discussion of how Macron's Bastille Day spectacle of 2017 inspired President Trump to throw a military parade of his own.

The state dinner will mark a pivotal moment in a bilateral relationship that has developed and matured markedly since the emotional US-French conflict over the Iraq war in 2003. On the one hand, Macron's privilege in securing the coveted first state dinner invitation is a testament to the privileged position France has been able to establish in Washington across both Democratic and Republican administrations as a vital partner in fighting terrorism and sharing the transatlantic security burden. On the other hand, the pomp, circumstance, and references to Yorktown, Bellau Wood, and Normandy will not paper over growing differences between Washington and Paris about key international matters that could undermine the essential gains in practical cooperation that have defined the relationship over the last decade and could return it to a period of competition and rivalry.

The state dinner will celebrate the fact that the Franco-American alliance dates back to the American Revolution. A shared love of liberty—and a desire to share that gift with the rest of the world—binds the two countries together and underpins their long-standing alliance. But it also sets the stage for an occasionally tempestuous bilateral relationship marked by deep cooperation and, sometimes, competitive rivalry.

The elections of Donald Trump in the United States in 2016 and Emmanuel Macron in France in 2017 raise the prospect of a new era in Franco-American relations after a decade of ever closer ties. Both countries

shocked themselves and the world in highly anticipated elections, which overturned the political status quo. The United States opted for a populist, nationalist real estate mogul in Donald Trump who promised an America-first agenda. France rejected far-right populism in favor of a centrist reformer with aims to modernize France's labor markets and renew the European project. Both leaders promised disruption at home and abroad, but seek a different end-state and different means of reaching their destination.

At the same time, Trump and Macron inherited a robust Franco-American alliance underpinned by democratic values, strong trade ties, and compelling shared national interests that have pushed practical cooperation to new heights over the last decade, especially in the military and security domains. Put simply, both countries need each other to achieve their foreign and national security policy ambitions.

Trump's unexpected election and message of populist nationalism has produced great uncertainty in Europe and around the world. Heading into the state visit, Macron will ponder several central questions: does Trump's presidency mark a noisy and brash form of continuity in US foreign policy that trumpets America-first rhetoric for domestic purposes but maintains strategic priorities and core alliances? Or does Trump intend to upend the Western alliance as well as the rules-based international security and economic order that the United States helped create with Europe and on which France has come to rely? The answer to these questions will go some way toward determining whether the unprecedented levels of practical cooperation between Washington and Paris in recent years might see a regression as France looks to strengthen its bonds with Europe and global partners.

In the face of US uncertainty—and in light of France's own domestic and regional challenges—President Macron has chosen a four-pronged foreign policy strategy. The strategy maintains the transatlantic link while hedging for the prospect that Trump and his Eurosceptic nationalism

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represent an enduring trend in US foreign policy. And it seeks advantage for France in Trump's perceived retreat from the existing world order. First and foremost, Macron has invested in domestic renewal as a catalyst to reinvigorate the European economic and strategic project. Second, he has aimed to seduce Trump from a position of strength in order to influence him to settle on policy outcomes that would be minimally damaging to the international order and Franco-American cooperation. Third, Macron has maintained an open dialogue with other major powers and reiterated France's ambition to maintain its strategic autonomy. And fourth, he has served as a vocal champion and defender of multilateralism, taking his case directly to the English-speaking world to challenge the global shift toward nationalism.

It is too early to know if the Trump-Macron era will mark a regression in bilateral relations, but the outcome of the state visit could serve as an important indicator of the alliance's future trajectory. Since his election, Macron has shown a pragmatism and opportunism in dealing with Trump that suggests the United States and France can continue to expand practical cooperation in certain fields, even as they disagree on questions of global governance, multilateral affairs, and some sensitive political issues.

But in the end, the legacy of Macron-Trump relations is likely to be determined by Washington. The more Trump attacks elements of the post-World War II international order that the United States helped to build, the more likely that the relationship may revert to a posture of competition that risks undermining the gains of the last decade. Such an outcome would further strain the cohesion of the Western alliance at a time of enhanced competition from authoritarian rivals China and Russia. The more Trump opts for a mainstream foreign policy (of deeds, if not tweets), the better the chances for the two countries to maintain the strong cooperation of recent years and to even strengthen ties in select areas.

Macron and Trump Inherit a Strong Franco-American Relationship

Donald Trump inherited many foreign policy headaches when he came into office. The Franco-American relationship was not one of them.

During the decade prior to his election, French-US relations developed to unprecedented levels of cooperation

at a practical level. Washington and Paris enjoyed increasingly close cooperation at the military level, in multilateral affairs, counterterrorism, diplomacy, and in trade and economic affairs. The second George W. Bush term and Barack Obama years in the United States and Nicolas Sarkozy/François Hollande years in France represented a major revitalization from the dramatic crisis of the Iraq war split in 2003.

History teaches that periodic turbulence is the norm rather than the exception in French-American relations. US officials are fond of referring to France as the United States' oldest ally. Yet, it is also true that this over two centuries-old alliance has enjoyed simultaneous conflict and cooperation throughout its long history. The two countries' shared sense of universal values, geopolitical ambitions, and flinty vigilance of their own sovereignty have created many moments of drama and tension since the creation of the French Fifth Republic in 1958.¹

"It remains to be seen if the Trump presidency will result in a new set of structural dynamics that could put the gains of the past at risk."

In the years since the dramatic transatlantic crisis over the Iraq war in 2003, structural factors in the bilateral relationship and in international politics more broadly pushed Washington and Paris closer together. It remains to be seen if the Trump presidency will result in a new set of structural dynamics that could put the gains of the past at risk.

Five major structural factors allowed for a rapprochement between the United States and Paris. First, in the aftermath of the disastrous invasion of Iraq, the second-term Bush administration and the Obama administration pursued a foreign policy more focused on allies as partners to tackle global challenges. This more pragmatic foreign policy reduced the specter of a unilateralist America as a threat to Europe. Second, this more pragmatic United States gained a greater appreciation for the role allies could play in supporting US foreign policy goals around the world. Third, the emergence (or re-emergence) of influential "middle powers" in key regions like Turkey, Brazil, Iran, China, or Russia began

¹ There are numerous examples to cite: French President de Gaulle's 1966 withdrawal from NATO's integrated command and eviction of US forces and NATO from France; de Gaulle's vocal opposition to the Vietnam war and recognition of Communist China; disagreements over the 1967 Six Days war; Mitterrand's Mexico City speech of 1981; and of course, the 2003 disagreements over the Iraq war.

to crowd out France's Gaullist-era strategic space to act as a non-aligned actor and alternative to the United States. Fourth, France came to see that in a globalized and increasingly competitive world, a lack of American power and enforcement of international norms could threaten French interests as much as American unilateralism. A clear example was President Obama's passivity in Syria in 2013, which frustrated France nearly as much as President Bush's unilateralism in Iraq did. As Natatlie Nougayrede reports, "It is hard to overstate how livid the French foreign policy establishment was with Obama's hesitant decision-making style, particularly when it came to Syria."² And finally, the United Kingdom's gradual loss of military capability and political will, as well as its self-imposed removal from the European Union (EU), has reduced London's influence in Washington to Paris's benefit.

France Debates its Place in a Multipolar World

These structural changes in the international system accompanied, and no doubt influenced, an evolving ideological debate in French foreign policy circles about the role the country should play in the world. The French foreign affairs establishment maintains a cross-party consensus in its determination to uphold France's influence in the world, its strategic autonomy, and its nuclear arsenal. France's recently published defense review reaffirms these goals, as did the recent presidential campaign.³ But there is a growing debate within the same establishment about the kind of relationship France should have with its Western allies, including the United States. This debate is not new but has taken on a new importance in light of the structural changes to the international system.⁴

One side of the establishment sees France as fundamentally part of a "Western community" along with the United States and other European allies. Membership in this community comes with a certain set of democratic norms and liberal values that France is obligated to support, defend, and reflect at home. Supporters of this view believe France's position in the West requires it to support allied solidarity on Russia, whether through participating in EU sanctions, NATO reinforcement measures, or by

renouncing arms transfers to Russia in the aftermath of the Crimea invasion.⁵ This camp puts a priority on allied solidarity and on common values and sees them as intricately linked to France's core interests.

Detractors refer to the "pro-Western" camp pejoratively as "neoconservatives" and Atlanticists. The second camp—whose members pride themselves on being "realists"—looks toward France's Gaullist era as a model and believes France should occupy its own "pole" in international affairs—detached from any particular alignment. Many in this camp believe France should maintain positive relations with the major powers regardless of ideology, maintain a distance from the United States, and pursue a foreign policy based solely on national interests. These so-called realists maintain a belief that France's autonomy and nonalignment with the United States gives Paris greater influence in world affairs.

Of course, this debate oversimplifies the complex realities of French foreign policy, as foreign policy paradigms often do.⁶ France supported the western camp in previous crises during the Gaullo-François Mitterrand period, such as the Cuban missile crisis, the Euromissile crisis of the 1980s, or the Gulf War of 1990. Gaullist presidents like Jacques Chirac cooperated closely with the United States and other allies on military matters in the Balkans and Afghanistan. And of course, France and the United States squabbled over numerous issues during Hollande's and Sarkozy's presidencies, while otherwise aligning on significant global and regional issues. As Justin Vaïsse points out in his critique of the contemporary French foreign policy debate around this outdated paradigm, the challenges of a multipolar world (the rise of China, budgetary constraints, questions about the future of the European project, to name a few) make a debate oriented around France's relationship with the United States increasingly irrelevant. New geopolitical realities have pushed the United States and France toward greater practical cooperation for the sake of shared mutual interests. Recent French policy makers have seen greater upside and interests in alignment within the western camp.

2 Natalie Nougayrede, "France's Gamble," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/western-europe/2017-08-15/frances-gamble>.

3 Boris Toucas, "Understanding the Implications of France's Strategic Review on Defense and National Security," Center for Strategic and International Studies, October 19, 2017, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/understanding-implications-frances-strategic-review-defense-and-national-security>

4 James Benkowski and Bradley Potter, "The Center Cannot Hold: Continuity and Change in Donald Trump's Foreign Policy," *War on the Rocks*, November 1, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/the-center-cannot-hold-continuity-and-change-in-donald-trumps-foreign-policy/>.

5 "Diplomatie: La politique étrangère de la France n'est pas « néoconservatrice, »" *Le Monde*, July 3, 2017, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2017/07/03/diplomatie-la-politique-etrangere-de-la-france-n-est-pas-neoconservatrice_5154914_3232.html.

6 Justin Vaïsse, "Le Passe d'un Oxyrane : Le débat Français de Politique Etrangère," *Esprit*, November 2017. <https://esprit.presse.fr/article/vaïsse-justin/le-passe-d-un-oxyrane-le-debat-francais-de-politique-etrangere-39714>.



President Barack Obama meets with President Nicolas Sarkozy of France in the Oval Office, March 30, 2010. Source: The White House/Pete Souza

If recent French leaders have carried less ideological baggage about transatlantic cooperation—and even aligned with the United States on key issues—it may also be the result of generational change. Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande were not only less ideological about transatlantic relations than their predecessors at the Elysee; they also were the first French presidents to be born after the end of the Second World War and with no immediate links to the de Gaulle era. Nicolas Sarkozy promised a "rupture" from his predecessor Jacques Chirac at both the international and the domestic level. A central pillar of his foreign policy was to "decomplexify" France's relationship with NATO and pivot toward the United States; he succeeded where his predecessors had failed at reintegrating France into NATO's military command. As President, Hollande reaffirmed Sarkozy's reintegration into NATO's military command—removing the risk of a socialist reversal—and further developed the linkages with the United States in the fight against terrorism.⁷ This same change of generation has worked its way throughout the entire

French foreign policy and diplomatic corps, resulting in a more internationally minded, if not instinctively Atlanticist, workforce.⁸

Yet the recent Atlanticist tilts of Presidents Sarkozy, Hollande, and even Macron does not mean that the debate is closed over France's relationship with the United States. While it is true that the center-right and center-left have both agreed, for example, on the permanence of France's NATO reintegration, ascendant extremist parties in France challenge this consensus. So, while Macron emerged as the victor in the last elections, causing some to see France as a bulwark of liberalism in the face of Anglo-Saxon isolationism, it is worth recalling that Macron won but 24 percent of the first-round ballots in the 2017 presidential election. "Extreme" candidates from the far-left and far-right—both of whom expressed skepticism or even hostility toward the United States—won 40 percent of the first-round ballot in France. Even Sarkozy's former prime minister, François Fillon, who led the center-right

7 Hubert Védrine, "Rapport pour le Président de la République française sur les conséquences du retour de la France dans le commandement intégré de l'Otan, sur l'avenir de la relation transatlantique et les perspectives de l'Europe de la défense," November 14, 2012, <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/124000607.pdf>.

8 "Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay : 3 Questions à Christian Lequesne," *IRIS*, January 13, 2017, <http://www.iris-france.org/86979-ethnographie-du-quai-dorsay-3-questions-a-christian-lequesne/>.

Republicans into the 2017 presidential elections, raised alarms in Washington for his Russophilia and suspicion of US power.⁹ This suggests that the foreign policy debate in France concerning its relationship with its American ally and NATO remains open, even if there is broad consensus about France's commitment to strategic autonomy and remaining a nuclear power. And it suggests that the gains in transatlantic relations of the last decade should not be assumed to be permanent or irreversible.

Trump Amplifies a Bipartisan Frustration with Transatlantic Burden sharing

France, of course, was not alone in rethinking its place in a turbulent world over the last decade.

The rise of Donald Trump and the popular appeal of his America-first views caught many US foreign policy experts by surprise. Trump's swift ascent struck fear into the hearts of many US allies, particularly countries dependent on the United States for their defense. For a certain segment of the French foreign policy establishment, Trump's election on a nationalist platform merely reaffirmed a long-held skepticism of America's commitment to Europe dating back to the United States' return home after the World War I.

While Trump's swift rise and blunt language alarmed allies and caught the US policy elite by surprise, his frustration with European burden sharing merely continued a recent trend of bipartisan American frustration with the transatlantic relationship in general. Trump and Obama loyalists would protest the comparison to the other, but the two presidents share similar frustrations with European burden sharing and effectiveness—if in very different ways and styles. Members of both parties in Congress, as well as some rank and file soldiers in the US military, have also expressed frustration about the level of allied burden sharing. Obama famously referred to France and the United Kingdom as “free riders” in a long and professorial analysis of his frustrations with the burden sharing of the Libya war.¹⁰ By contrast, Trump has opted for a less academic, and more blunt assessment of NATO as “obsolete,” hectoring allies about their need to pay their fair share.

Nevertheless, both concluded that Europe must spend more on defense.¹¹

Obama sought greater burden sharing from Europe as the best means of advancing his multilateralist worldview; however, Trump has yet to articulate an animating vision for allies in his broader foreign policy strategy. For Obama, allies and coalitions bolstered the legitimacy of America's cause in a multipolar world where complex, borderless challenges required international cooperation. They helped the United States tackle tough challenges in the world like the Iran nuclear issue, climate change, and sanctioning Russian aggression. In the Obama doctrine, allies support an internationalist—if not actively interventionist—American foreign policy and enhanced US power. France, of course, fits nicely into this Obama world view.

By contrast, Trump came into office seeing allies as a burden to be carried, not as an asset to be leveraged toward a larger goal. Multilateralism risks constraining US sovereignty, as do international institutions and agreements like the Paris accord or the Iran deal. Allies are not expected to take on a greater share of the burden so they can play a larger role in a coordinated, US-led coalition to tackle global challenges, except perhaps to assist US efforts in isolating American adversaries like Iran and North Korea.¹² They must pay up to reimburse the United States for its own sacrifices, and at times, they may also be economic rivals to be vanquished. Allies can play their part in advancing and supporting America-first interests, yet the president himself has made clear that he will put America first and expects other countries to do the same.

Trump's carnivorous and disruptive worldview poses a particular puzzle for French policy makers. On the one hand, France has less to lose than other US allies from Trump's foreign policy. France carries its share of the defense and security burden within NATO much better than most European allies. And second—and of course, related—as a nuclear power with a first-rate military, France is less reliant on Washington for its security than Germany or smaller states proximate to Russia. Yet Trump's foreign policy does change the paradigm for modern French-American relations.

For much of the Fifth Republic, France chafed at the preponderance of American power and unilateral tendencies to benefit US interests and support the *pax americana*. This pitted Paris against more Atlanticist allies who valued—rather than resented—America's enduring presence and involvement in European security. Under Presidents Barack Obama and Nicolas Sarkozy, that dynamic began to evolve. The multilateralist Obama and Atlanticist Sarkozy (and status quo Hollande), found convergence on many issues, such as a reset with Russia and the fight against climate change. But at certain times during Obama's tenure, France lamented US disengagement and passivity in enforcing international norms, particularly concerning Syria and the fight against terrorism in the Hollande years and during Obama's reluctant participation in the Libya operation in 2010. Former French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius reflected Paris's concern in a speech in Paris in November 2013 saying, “The United States seems no longer to wish to become absorbed by crises that do not align with its new vision of its national interest.”¹³

Today, the dynamic is altogether different. Macron and his team are invested in trying to influence Trump to prevent him from tearing down the entire international system that underpins European peace and prosperity and which the United States participated in creating. This is a whole new risk and challenge for Paris to manage.

Macron's Dilemma: Is Trump a Revolutionary Actor or a Noisy Status Quo President?

For leaders like President Macron, the most pressing question is whether President Trump represents a noisy blip in history, a wholesale transformation of US foreign policy toward nationalism and protectionism, or something in between. There is evidence to support any of the above arguments,¹⁴ and the debate will continue in the months and years to come.

Supporters of the fact that Trump is a revolutionary focused on maximum disruption can point to a mountain of evidence. They can refer to the president's instinctive sympathies for strongmen; refusal to criticize Vladimir Putin; departure from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP); seemingly spontaneous threats against North Korea via social media, followed by an abrupt and improvised willingness to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un; initial staffing choices of unorthodox figures; failure to staff key administrative positions; recusal from the Paris

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climate accords; his refusal to recertify the Iran nuclear accord and decision to leave the deal's fate in the hands of the Congress; or his unilateral recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. This list alone could convince any analyst that Trump represents a break from the recent past and merits a reassessment by allies. The mere turbulence of the Trump administration, the prospect of continued growth of populism within the Republican party, and the failure of the United States to pass significant reforms via legislation bolster the argument that Trump is a harbinger of long-term disruption with international consequences that could impact Franco-US relations. The departure of Secretary of State Tillerson, National Economic Council Director Gary Cohn, and the imposition of steel and aluminum tariffs in March 2018 all portend a more hawkish and nationalistic foreign policy for Trump in the months ahead and a prospect of conflict with Europe.

However, there is a compelling alternative case that Trump represents a noisy and indeed turbulent example of relatively mainstream American Republican foreign policy. Words (and yes, tweets) matter in foreign policy, but deeds matter more. Chaos at the domestic political level cannot be discounted but should not be confused for a fundamental reassessment of national interests or strategic choices. Despite the president's criticism of insufficient burden sharing from allies and his praise for Vladimir Putin, his administration has maintained continuity in important aspects of US foreign policy, including a reaffirmation of US commitments to treaty allies in Europe and Asia. The Trump administration has not stopped or otherwise restricted US engagement in or leadership of NATO and, in fact, has dedicated additional resources to the European Deterrence Initiative;

9 Matthew Dalton, “France Poised for a pro-Russia Pivot,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/france-poised-for-pro-russia-pivot-1482946472>.

10 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *Atlantic*, April 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

11 “Joint Press Conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg and the President of the United States Donald Trump,” The White House, April 12, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-press-conference-president-trump-nato-secretary-general-stoltenberg/>.

12 “Remarks by President Trump at NATO Unveiling of the Article 5 Wall and Berlin Wall Memorials,” The White House, May 25, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-nato-unveiling-article-5-berlin-wall-memorials-brussels-belgium/>; Gary D. Cohn and H.R. McMaster, “America First Doesn't Mean America Alone,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>.

13 Roger Cohen, “French Muscle, American Cheese,” *New York Times*, November 14, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/opinion/cohen-french-muscle-american-cheese.html>.

14 For a wider reading of the debates about the nature of Trump's foreign policy, see James Benkowski and A. Bradley Potter, “The Center Cannot Hold: Continuity and Change in Donald Trump's Foreign Policy,” *War on the Rocks*, November 1, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/11/the-center-cannot-hold-continuity-and-change-in-donald-trumps-foreign-policy/>.



President Donald J. Trump with President Emmanuel Macron for joint press conference at Élysée – Présidence de la République française in Paris, France in July 2017. *Source:* U.S. Embassy France

he has not rolled back sanctions on Russia and has continued the Obama-era confiscation of Russian diplomatic infrastructure, while sending weapons to Ukraine that President Obama refused to authorize; he has avoided actual military escalation in North Korea and has instead pursued more bold diplomacy than previous administrations; and at the time of writing in March 2018, he has not yet repudiated the Iran nuclear deal, despite campaigning against it. Trump signed off on the entry of Montenegro into NATO at the May 2017 summit. He has enhanced the aggressiveness of the American campaign against ISIS in the Middle East and Africa, without changing the fundamentals of the US approach. His recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital has not done much to inflame an already inflamed Middle East, as some predicted. After early murmurings of hostility toward the European Union and pro-Brexit (British exit from the European Union) sympathies during the transition, the president and his administration have taken no concrete actions to suggest the intent or capacity to undermine Brussels.

Of course, Trump himself will always be volatile and unorthodox. Perhaps more importantly for European allies is the fact that the president's own turbulence and disruptive instincts appear to be constrained by his senior staff in some cases, and more importantly have produced an Atlanticist counter reaction by the Congress and Democrats. This suggests a permanence of US interests in a strong transatlantic alliance and a united Europe.

Prior to Trump, frustration with European allies was a growing bipartisan concern, although the importance of NATO had risen in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea. Since Trump's election, and given his seeming Russophile stance and denigration of NATO, Democrats have emerged as some of the most Russia-skeptic, pro-NATO voices in the US Congress, particularly as they seek domestic political advantage by tying Trump to Russia. In the months after Trump's election, the US Senate passed a measure of unanimous support for NATO's article 5, and public support for NATO has increased in the United States since Trump began his campaign attacks on the

alliance.¹⁵ Indeed, so great is the concern over the president's Russia intentions that the Senate passed sanctions legislation that limits executive authority and at one point threatened to catch European allies in the crossfire between the two ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.¹⁶ In this political climate, perhaps the greater risk for France and other European powers is that a newfound Russophobic turn in US foreign policy in the Congress could impact Europe's substantial commercial ties with Russia and limit the prospects for engagement with Moscow when a window of opportunity arises.

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The lasting impact of the Trump administration will likely be something in between status quo and a revolutionary reassessment of US strategic interests. The Trump administration is still young and the consequences of its policies, actions, and rhetoric remain unclear. It can take generations to truly appreciate the historical impact of policy choices. Yet, even if the administration proves to be more continuity than revolution, Trump's unconventional style and rhetoric—and the mere shock of a populist nationalist in the White House—may have its own unforeseen consequences on US relationships around the globe

Warning Signs for France in the Trump Era

France and other allies invested in US leadership of the international system should be on the lookout for further signs that the administration is truly intent on undoing the international order. These are measures

which could lead to a degradation of relations between the two countries at the political level—and perhaps even upset the practical cooperation which has made the Franco-American alliance so strong in recent years.

The first major challenge would be a full embrace of protectionism from the United States. Trump's abandonment of TPP was a major warning sign, but it was also a piece of domestic politics—keeping a campaign promise and undoing a major Obama-era legacy. The TPP withdrawal, combined with Trump's own unpopularity in Europe, has effectively taken the prospects of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), the transatlantic counterpart to TPP, off the table for now (perhaps to the relief of some in Paris). Trump's March 2018 announcement of tariffs on imported aluminum and steel—including from Europe—has agitated Europe and raised the prospect of a transatlantic trade war. A US retreat from the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA), for example, would send chills not only throughout the Americas but also in Europe and Asia, as protectionists in the White House would appear ascendant. A more protectionist United States could upset practical cooperation in a variety of fields. Important conflicts on economic issues could also arise between the European Union, and by extension France as a major driver of EU policy, and the United States over tax policy, data privacy, or the treatment of US technology giants in Europe. Another possible scenario is that a messy Brexit could offer the United States an opportunity to seek advantage in its trade ties with the UK at the expense of the EU, which would likely draw European retaliation.¹⁷

A second major risk is that the United States might choose to use secondary sanctions against Europe as a means of exerting additional pressure on Iran for the nuclear accord. The departure of Secretary of State Tillerson—who was intensely working with Europe on a compromise that could satisfy President Trump—raises the prospect of a transatlantic break with Europe over the Iran deal. Europe has promised to protect its economic interests and sovereignty, which could set it on a collision course with the United States. Turning the Iran issue from an area of unprecedented transatlantic cooperation into an area of allied conflict would be a major foreign policy failure for the United States. Of course, transatlantic tensions over sanctions enforcement are not a new issue. Even under President Obama, the

¹⁵ “Senate Jabs Trump in Unanimous Vote on NATO,” *AP*, June 15, 2017; Michael Smith, “Most Americans Support NATO Alliance,” *Gallup*, February 17, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/204071/americans-support-nato-alliance.aspx>.

¹⁶ Zeeshan Aleen, “Why Europe is so angry over the big Russia sanctions bill,” *Vox*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/7/26/16034148/europe-russia-sanctions-bill-republicans-trump>.

¹⁷ Dr. Thomas Wright, Statement: *Brexit: A Negotiation Update*: Testimony before the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, 115th Cong., December 6, 2017.

aggressive enforcement of US sanctions on Iran resulted in major fines against French entities, raising growing concerns among the economic and political elite in Paris about the power of the US financial system in Europe.

A third risk is that the United States ends up in actual military conflict with North Korea over its nuclear program. The effects of a conflict would likely be catastrophic in northeast Asia and could well impact Europe directly, even if only through the repercussions of a likely clash in cyberspace. While the impact of conflict with North Korea is unknown, Europe could well find itself at odds with the United States and tempted to blame Washington for the dispute.

A fourth risk would be a further retreat from shared values and norms by President Trump, which could hinder cooperation with the European Union and its core member states. A revival of coercive interrogation, for example, (which seems unlikely as long as Jim Mattis remains Secretary of Defense) could impede counterterrorism cooperation with France in important theaters. A further American retreat from, or sabotage of, key multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization or the United Nations could also set Paris and Washington at odds.

Finally, a fifth risk is that Macron visibly fails in his attempt to influence Trump and finds himself ignored or marginalized by the United States as it undertakes a series of unilateral actions in foreign affairs. Indeed, there are signs this is already happening. Trump's departure from the Paris climate accords, failure to recertify the Iran deal, and recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital were all decisions taken over Macron's personal intervention. Macron's failure to achieve positive outcomes from Trump could weaken the French president's prestige on the world stage and would raise the stakes in his strategy to reanimate the European Union as an economic and geopolitical force. It is tolerable for France to be opposed to the United States. It is intolerable for France to be ignored by Washington or fail to win a seat at the table.

Opportunities for France-America Relations in the Trump-Macron Era

Yet the Trump-Macron relationship should not be seen in terms of risks alone. There are also opportunities that the unique circumstances and challenges of our time present for bilateral relations. As has been noted,¹⁸ the two presidents seem to enjoy some personal chemistry

and commonalities, despite vast differences in outlook and intellectual framework. Both men clearly want the relationship to succeed. But more importantly, common interests will create opportunities for advances in the relationship even if Paris and Washington disagree over a plethora of multilateral issues.

The security and defense relationship can continue to blossom, given the commonalities of interest in the Sahel and Syria in fighting terrorism. France and the Trump administration share a common goal of a Europe that is more capable of taking on the defense burden. France's new defense spending law, expected to be passed this June, will enshrine reinvestments in France's military and put France on a pathway to sustain the 2 percent of gross domestic product defense spending target for NATO. While Trump's administration has been cool to the EU's Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in defense, Trump and Macron both agree that other European allies need to share more of the burden in defense. France and the United States also have a major incentive to work with key allies in the Arab world in promoting a more tolerant version of Islam.

“Of course, the US-France relationship has long been defined by issues much broader than security, defense, and politics. The relationship goes far deeper than ties between Paris and Washington or the Elysee and the White House.”

Of course, the US-France relationship has long been defined by issues much broader than security, defense, and politics. The relationship goes far deeper than ties between Paris and Washington or the Elysee and the White House. Macron's emphasis on reviving the French economy offers opportunities for expanded trade, commercial, and investment ties between the United States and France. Macron has made clear that Paris will open its doors to talented Americans seeking to conduct research and development, leverage Paris's booming start-up scene, and create jobs. French history is replete with cases of American talent fleeing to Paris to find

¹⁸ See Celia Belin, “The Macron-Trump Co-Dependency,” Brookings, September 18, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/18/the-macrontrump-co-dependency/>; Benjamin Haddad, “Emmanuel Macron is No Anti-Trump,” *Foreign Policy*, June 16, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/06/16/emmanuel-macron-is-no-anti-trump/>.

inspiration and expand their creative horizons, particularly in the arts and culture. Perhaps the Trump era will produce another such wave. Moreover, Trump's brand of politics and the stasis in Congress is likely to produce even greater activity among states, cities, and regions in the United States to collaborate with French counterparts on issues like climate research, clean energy, economic development, and structural economic issues which confront both sides of the Atlantic.¹⁹

Ultimately, France has less to lose from Trump—and perhaps more to gain—than other traditional US allies. It has less to lose than South Korea, or even Japan, which are hugely reliant on US deterrence of North Korea and may well have the most to lose in the event of a conflict between Washington and Pyongyang. Less to lose than Germany, which is still uncomfortable thinking geopolitically and remains dependent strategically, and to some extent politically, on the United States. Less to lose than Canada or Mexico, which could find themselves badly exposed by the president's protectionist trade and restrictive immigration policies. And less to lose than the United Kingdom, which, in the context of Brexit, has become more reliant on the United States.

Pragmatic but Proactive: Macron Chooses a Strategy in the Face of Uncertainty from the United States

In the face of the uncertainty posed by Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron has chosen to be both pragmatic and proactive. Pragmatic by opting to preserve the transatlantic link and invest in his relationship with Trump in hopes of influencing his agenda. Proactive by reinvesting French influence in the European project, fostering ties with the major powers in world affairs, and serving as a vocal champion for multilateralism.

Emmanuel Macron understands that the transatlantic alliance is important to France and that it is more important than any one person or president. He also understands that the United States has great capacity to do harm to French interests in the international order if Trump chooses a revolutionary approach to foreign affairs. And he knows that France needs US cooperation to advance its most important security interests and achieve important multilateral objectives.

This sober realism guided Macron's decision to invest in his relationship with Trump in hopes of influencing him

toward a better outcome. This alone is somewhat remarkable given the not too distant history of French presidents defining the country's greatness in opposition to the United States. After all, it would be easy for Macron to have taken a page out of the old Gaullist playbook and play the anti-American card. Surveys show nearly nine in ten French hold a low opinion of Trump.²⁰ The far left, far right, ecologists, and Gaullists, in theory, all could rally around a grandstanding Macron who seeks to poke Trump in the eye. But Macron's decision to turn toward Trump is both a sign of the president's boldness, as well as a maturation of French diplomacy to put a clear-eyed assessment of interests over nostalgic visions of grandeur.

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Perhaps Macron—ever the opportunist—sensed that he was uniquely positioned in the West to forge rapprochement with Trump and enhance France's role within the transatlantic alliance. Consider the alternatives: London is both distracted and weakened by Brexit and needs US support as it juggles a messy divorce from Brussels; Angela Merkel's close relationship with Obama and Germany's defense spending deficit and large trade surplus with the United States precluded her from forming a relationship of confidence with Trump. Macron's English fluency, business background, outsider status, and lack of history with Obama left him uniquely positioned to try to build a relationship of confidence with Trump. Trump's military-heavy cabinet—who had experience serving in combat theaters alongside French soldiers—elevated Paris's standing in Trump's White House. And of course, shared interests in fighting terrorism and extracting greater contributions from allies positioned Macron to foster a meaningful dialogue with Trump on common ground from day one.

But even as Macron sought to forge a close bond with Trump, he also marked out his differences with the new US president with confidence and clarity. Macron has

¹⁹ Erik Brattberg and David Livingston, “Working Around Trump on Climate,” Carnegie Europe, November 17, 2017, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/74767>.

²⁰ Alain Barluet, “Sondage: Neuf Français sur dix ont une opinion négative de Donald Trump,” *Le Figaro*, November 2, 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2017/11/02/01003-20171102ARTFIG00372-sondage-neuf-francais-sur-dix-ont-une-opinion-negative-de-donald-trump.php>.



The U.S. and French flags are raised during the 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment cemetery stone ceremony in Hémevez, France, June 3, 2017. Source: US Air Force/Airman 1st Class Alexis C. Schultz

not shied away from airing his differences with Trump, even as he has refused to make these differences the basis of his strategy toward the United States. France remains too dependent on the United States for counterterrorism and political support on other issues that matter to France. But he has also learned from Tony Blair and others who have sought to influence Washington from a privileged position not to give the appearance of servility—as the United States’ “poodle.” Hence Macron’s absurdly long handshakes with the US President, the “make our planet great again pledge,” and impressive English-language interviews and speeches to US and international media extolling the virtues of the Iran deal, the Paris climate accords, and France’s opposition to the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital. Perhaps better than most foreign leaders, Macron understands that by flattering and showing respect for Trump at a personal level, he could stake out positions of independence at a political level. Macron’s hope is that by forging a relationship of trust and respect with Trump that he might be able to dissuade the America-first president from attacking and undermining multilateral fora and achievements.

Macron’s investment in Trump and transatlantic ties is, of course, a distant second priority to his vision to revitalize the European Union. European reform is intricately linked to his domestic economic agenda, and Macron also shares clear pro-European political convictions. His symbolic choices (first visit to Berlin as president); staffing choices (his national security Sherpa in the Elysee is the former French ambassador to Berlin); and his policy choices—a major, detailed speech to the Sorbonne outlining his European vision—all demonstrate his firm European convictions and belief in the Franco-German engine in particular.

While Macron sees Europe as a priority for its own reasons, an investment in Europe is also a medium- to long-term hedge against an uncertain US foreign policy. Macron describes the European Union as needing to develop a trade, defense, and social policy capable of protecting European citizens in a globalized world defined by the major powers of China, Russia, and the United States. Macron envisions a Europe that protects its citizens and amplifies the power and sovereignty of small European states in a world increasingly

dominated by large, assertive nations. Key to Europe’s capability to hedge against an uncertain American foreign policy and resolve US concerns about unequal burden sharing is greater progress on European defense, notably on permanent structured cooperation and investment in capabilities.

Yet the road toward European reform will not be easy. The effort to reform European structures is linked to Macron’s ability to achieve difficult reforms at home to revitalize the French economy. Even if Macron is able to revitalize the French economy, reform of the EU will require delicate diplomacy with a complicated tableau of European Union members, some of whom have taken an increasingly illiberal and Eurosceptic turn.

“The extent to which the Trump administration truly acts on its protectionist, nationalist inclinations will shape the future of French-American relations and may well determine how far Europe will push to establish greater autonomy from its long-standing US ally.”

In seeking to reform Europe as a hedge against American uncertainty and a degrading international order, Macron is also in a race against time. The United States and the international environment more broadly have become volatile at a faster rate than Germany and other French partners in Europe have become reliable geopolitical allies.

Given the plodding nature of European diplomacy and the long-term uncertainty of US foreign policy, Macron has also developed a third pillar of developing relations with the major foreign powers. This, of course, is in perfect continuity with French foreign policy tradition and in line with Macron’s status quo goal of preserving French autonomy, influence, and weight in world affairs. In the same way that Macron invited Trump to be his guest of honor for the Bastille Day celebrations—despite Trump’s unpopularity in France—the new French president invited Vladimir Putin to Versailles as one of his first visitors. The French president is making diplomatic inroads in the Persian Gulf, the Levant, East Asia, and Africa as well.

Fourth, France has invested heavily in multilateralism and defense of the international order, which reinforces his pro-European agenda. Multilateralism boosts French influence, given the country’s privileged position in major existing fora like NATO, the EU, and the UN Security Council in particular, but also informal venues like the Paris climate talks. The so-called “liberal international order” is also maximally friendly to the European project and its democratic values and emphasis on pooled sovereignty. Macron’s speeches, initiatives, and media appearances (particularly to the English-speaking world) have put a premium on the defense of the multilateral order and as a counter model within the West to Trump’s America-first nationalism.

Given the preponderance of US power and influence in shaping the world order, the wild card in French-American relations is Donald Trump, not Emmanuel Macron. Macron offers a beacon of hope for the European project at a time when leadership is sorely lacking on the continent. He also has the potential to do great things for France and French influence in the world. But he alone cannot and will not reshape the whole structure of the international order. A US President, however, does have that capability—particularly if he chooses an isolationist, protectionist path—and Donald Trump very well may have that intent.

The extent to which the Trump administration truly acts on its protectionist, nationalist inclinations will shape the future of French-American relations and may well determine how far Europe will push to establish greater autonomy from its long-standing US ally. Clearly there is sufficient volatility in both US and French domestic politics to imagine—if not predict—elections and policy choices that deviate from the status quo of the post-World War II era. Viewed from that perspective, Atlanticists from both the United States and Europe can take heart in the fact that France has at its helm a leader best positioned to work with and influence Trump, as well as one who is committed to building a more sustainable and balanced transatlantic relationship based around a more self-confident and autonomous Europe.

It is not impossible that a disruptive Trump could erode the alliance and create a rollback of the practical gains over the last decade. Yet the US-French alliance has ebbed and flowed over two centuries, through many ups and downs, changes in regime in France, and evolutions in the international environment. From that longer-term perspective, it would be too early to write off the Alliance or doom it to long-term decline because of one election.

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