The French-American Alliance in an America-First Era

Jeff Lightfoot
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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
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, France’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, Belleau 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 the pomp and ceremony of the Bastille Day spectacle of 2017 inspired President Trump to throw a military parade of his own.

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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 contributed to a significant upturn in French-US relations.

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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 Natalie Nougayrede reports, “It is hard to overstate how livid the French foreign policy establishment was with Obama’s decision-making style, particularly when it came to Syria.” 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 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. 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.1

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.2 This camp puts a priority on allied solidarity and on common values and sees them as intrinsically linked to France’s core interests.

Detractors refer to the “pro-Western” camp pejoratively as “neoconservatives” and Atlanticists. The second camp—call them “realists”—looks toward France’s Gaulist era as a model and believes France should occupy its own “pole” in international affairs—detached from any particular alignment. Many French policymakers 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.3 France supported the western camp in previous rounds of the Gaulois-François Mitterrand period, such as the Cuban missile crisis, the Euromissile crisis of the 1980s, or the Gulf War of 1990. Gaulist presidents like Jacques Chirac cooperated closely with the United States in 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 reintegration France into NATO’s military command. As President Hollande reaffirmed Sarkozy’s reintegration into NATO’s military command—removing the risk of a socialist reversaland further developed the linkages with the United States in the fight against terrorism.4 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.5

Yet the recent Atlanticist tilt 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 current generation 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, Francois Fillon, who led the center-right

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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 swift rise alarmed them to the point that they have reevaluated France's role in the world and the nature of its relationships with the United States. The French-American Alliance in an America-First Era

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 effective-ness—if in very different ways and styles. Members of both parties in Congress, as well as some rank and file soldiers for Trump, express a desire to hold European partners accountable for their 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 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. In any case, France is not expected to take on a greater share of the burden, but it 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. In any case, France is not expected to take on a greater share of the burden.
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he has not rolled back sanctions on Russia and has continued the Obama-era confiscation of Russian diplomatic infrastructure, while sending warnings 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.


Source: U.S. Embassy France

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 divisive 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 nonpartisan 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-skeptical, 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. 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. 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 last 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 appointment of Peter Navarro to the White House as the National Trade Council chairperson 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.

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 US-European 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
aggressive enforcement of U.S. 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 U.S. 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 of this sort on Macron, Europe could well find itself odd 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 example of the challenges of our time are the stakes in his strategy to reanimate the European Union as an economic and geopolitical force. It is telling that even a key institutional investor like the World Trade Organization or the United Nations could also find itself at odds with the United States and tempted to blame Washington for the dispute.

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 re-certify 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 tellable for France to be opposed to the United States, but 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 only. 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 major areas of shared concern 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 U.S.-French cooperation 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 high-level 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 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 a more country-specific relationship even if Paris and Washington disagree over a plethora of multilateral issues.

Ultimately, France has less to lose from Trump—and perhaps more to gain—than other traditional U.S. 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 geopo- litically and remains dependent strategically, and to some extent politically, on the United States. Less to lose than Canada or Mexico, which could find them- selves 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’s predecessor, a move that could pay dividends if Trump chooses a revolutionary approach to foreign affairs. He has also been aggressive in 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 un- derstands 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. Macron’s new defense spending law, which needs U.S. cooperation and investment, is a marquee event in the United States and France. Macron has made clear that Paris will open its doors to talented Americans seeking to conduct high-level 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 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 a more country-specific relationship even if Paris and Washington disagree over a plethora of multilateral issues.

Perhaps Macron—ever the opportunist—sensed that he was uniquely positioned in the West to forge rapproche- ment 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 decisions suggest that the German 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 baggage with the U.S. president all made 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 extract- ing 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 U.S. president with confidence and clarity. Macron has

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"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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Macron’s investment in Trump and transatlantic ties even as a tabling autonony 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 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 Elysée 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.

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 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.”
Jeff Lightfoot
Jeff Lightfoot is a nonresident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council, specializing in transatlantic security, European politics, France, and Middle East security. He is also vice president at the Jones Group International. Until 2014, Lightfoot was deputy director at the Atlantic Council’s Brent Scowcroft Center, where he served as project rapporteur or report author for numerous, high-level Atlantic Council studies on the most pressing issues for US foreign policy. In addition to earning his MA from the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, Lightfoot has studied overseas at Sciences Po, Paris and the Rouen Business School.

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List as of March 1, 2018
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