



With Biden in office, has Macron lost his zeal for Euro-self-reliance?

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In late 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron became one of the fiercest critics of the transatlantic alliance. “What we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO,” he famously declared.

He doubted the continuing value of the alliance’s Article V guarantee of collective defense: the pact “only works if the guarantor of last resort functions as such. I’d argue that we should reassess the reality of what NATO is in the light of the commitment of the United States.”

Which led him to break dramatically with Europe’s continued reliance on America. He advocated that the continent become a “geopolitical power” and “in control” of its own destiny. Last year, he insisted: “We cannot be the United States’ junior partner. I’m impatient for European solutions.”

He continued to advocate “strategic autonomy” after the November election. “We need to modernize our structures and create a level playing field for everyone,” he declared, opining that the “way forward is a strong and political Europe.” He believed this stance was necessary in dealing with America, which, he added, “will only respect us as allies if we are earnest, and if we are sovereign with respect to our defense.”

Which makes sense. The continent’s interests differ from those of America in many ways. Even when it comes to Russia.

Moscow is a malign actor, but, as a threat to America, it is a historical artifact. Russia has neither interest in striking nor opportunity to strike the United States. Bilateral economic ties are minimal. So long as the two governments avoid a nuclear arms race, any military competition will be on the periphery, such as in Central Asia and the Middle East.

In contrast, geography dictates that the continent has more to fear from Russia. However, with eleven times the economic power, four times the military outlays, and three times the population, Europe is more than able to defend itself. Under these circumstances, European states should control their own destiny rather than subcontract their future to the great power across the Atlantic.

As Macron emphasized, there is no certainty that Americans will forever put Europe’s interest before that of the American people, especially as the disparity in respective defense contributions grows ever larger.

However, it seems that was then. Now, after the election of Joe Biden, Macron's enthusiasm for self-reliance may be fading.

Of late, Macron, who undoubtedly realizes that the prospect of a revived Red Army marching down the Champs-Elysees is remote, to put it mildly, has been more focused on terrorism. He wants NATO to address the issue. And America, too.

Although the French president has not explicitly reversed his opposition to relying on Washington to lead against Russia, writer Bonnie Kristian notes that Macron is now talking about his hope for a United States "re-engaged in multilateralism," and "re-engaged in several places of conflict." In other words, Kristian writes, "a United States recommitted to the forever war Macron believes is necessary for counterterrorism, which he argues should be NATO's new organizing principle."

The day before Biden's inauguration, Macron spoke to the French military. While praising its operations around the world, he turned to the Middle East: "Through our presence in this region, we are an indispensable partner of our American allies and I am sure that in the new weeks, the new administration will have to take structuring decisions which will mark a re-engagement and an awareness of the nature of the fight against terrorism and for the stability of the region. Yes, in Syria we must resume and continue the fight against terrorism, this fight is not over. Yes, in Iraq we need to consolidate the sovereignty of this friendly state and support courageous leaders."

A few days later, Macron and Biden spoke. The French president appeared to push on an open door in seeking to draw the United States deeper into European and Middle Eastern affairs. According to the White House readout, "President Biden also stressed his commitment to bolstering the transatlantic relationship, including through NATO and the United States' partnership with the European Union. The leaders ... also agreed to work together on shared foreign policy priorities, including China, the Middle East, Russia, and the Sahel."

In fact, none of this should come as a surprise.

A couple years ago when Trump suggested bringing home America's forces from Syria, the Washington foreign policy establishment, or Blob, suffered a collective meltdown. These supposedly seasoned and knowledgeable policymakers appeared to believe that they would find their neighborhoods overrun by the likes of ISIS, Hamas, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, the Muslim Brotherhood, and random jihadists. It was an outbreak of mass hysteria, or "a phenomenon that transmits collective illusions of threats, whether real or imaginary, through a population and society as a result of rumors and fear."

Macron contributed to the policy delirium when he criticized Trump's decision: "I deeply regret the decision made on Syria," he said. Among other things, he improbably complained that it would result in the "destabilization" of a country which had suffered through years of bitter civil war. The French president naturally preferred for the U.S. to take over French responsibilities.

Paris long took pride in patrolling Francophone Africa, but the burden has increased of late: "The only forces fighting against terrorism in the Sahel region are the French forces," he complained. Of course, the region was of historical interest to France. Moreover, France provided the largest European contingent of the roughly 40,000 foreigners who joined ISIS. America's contribution, in contrast, was quite small.

Two years ago, Macron played the martyr, announcing that France would stay in Syria irrespective of Trump's plans: "The retreat from Syria announced by our American friends cannot make us deviate from our strategic objective —eradicating" the Islamic State. "We are staying invested to participate in the stabilization of the region," he added, insisting that "[a]ny rush to withdraw would be a mistake." With "rush" defined as leaving eight years after Syria collapsed into civil war.

Macron apparently now sees an opportunity to pull Washington back into Syria in a bigger way. Although Biden promised to exit the "forever wars," he already has temporized on other promises. Moreover, Secretary of State Antony Blinken previously expressed regret that the Obama administration did not do more in that tragic land. Those around Biden, several of whom supported every U.S. military intervention after 9/11, might find another justification to sell the president on accepting an enduring military presence in the Middle East.

Emmanuel Macron was right when he proposed that France take on a global defense role befitting a nation with its storied heritage and varied interests. The Biden administration also should expect America's allies to take over responsibility for their own security, with Washington playing a more distant back-up role. President Biden should invite Macron's France to lead the way.

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