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Harris's Paris trip doesn't solve her growing political problems at home

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A five-day trip intended to burnish Vice President Kamala Harris's credentials on the global stage and soothe relations with America's oldest ally instead went off without much notice as she faces new scrutiny about her future as a Democratic leader.

French media coverage of Harris's visit was sparse and evidence of "Kamala-mania," a term coined by one top development executive in town for a forum in which the vice president was the featured speaker, was hard to find. There were no local media interviews with Harris.

Instead, Harris came home to stories in the American press saying the White House is frustrated with her performance and that her own allies feel she is not being positioned to succeed and asking questions about her viability as a presidential contender in 2024 and beyond.

One Paris local, Mostafa, said he was only vaguely aware of the vice president's visit despite the road closures that had plagued the city for days. "I don't even know her name," he said. "Why is she here?"

Not until Harris attended an Armistice Day ceremony where French President Emmanuel Macron laid a wreath at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier did local coverage of her visit build visibly. Harris was shown several times on French national television during the widely aired memorial event and warmly greeted Macron and other officials at the start and end.

Harris's team billed her visit as evidence of the vice president's work on "consequential global challenges." But the timing, just one week after President Joe Biden met with world leaders at multilateral summits in Rome and Glasgow, was the first indication that Harris would be handling soft power diplomacy.

After a bilateral meeting with Macron, Harris's office issued a statement on the sit-down and a readout of the English-language remarks at the top. The White House issued a fact sheet on space and cyber initiatives that France had agreed to join.

There was no Elysee Palace statement on the visit, however. And after the meeting, Harris dined not with Macron but with her husband, Douglas Emhoff, at the American chief of mission's residence for the second time in two days. Each leader ignored questions from the press, including whether the United States needed to make amends for its role in collapsing a multibillion-dollar defense contract between France and Australia.

In Washington, attention to her trip was largely limited to a handful of words in remarks at the Pasteur Institute. Some heard her intoning a French accent. Macron drew similar criticism for speaking in a Marseille accent while in the coastal city earlier this year.

Aides said the invite from Macron came long before the submarine breach, but the timing and duration of the visit, choreographed to show the vice president more at ease on the world stage than in prior overseas engagements, suggested the dispute was not fully resolved.

"I suspect this trip was part of an ongoing effort to smooth French hackles over the AUKUS submarine deal. If you look at the items discussed, Harris is the chair of the U.S. National Space Council and Macron has emphasized climate change, so their agenda focused on issues where there was likely to be little disagreement," said Justin Logan, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and an expert on U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy.

A shoal of photographers swarmed her arrival next to Macron later that day at the Paris Peace Forum, where she gave opening remarks.

The decision to sidestep the most caustic issue facing the two nations, the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the U.S., which led Australia to end a lucrative contract with France, was emblematic of the mission: Don't ruffle feathers.

The executive who attended the Paris Peace Forum said that despite "blah blah" remarks, Harris was the White House official best placed to ease tensions publicly.

"It was a little angelic. It was a bit banal. It was a bit of 'blah blah,'" he said of the vice president's talk on ending inequality. "But that's the nature of these things."

Still, he praised Harris's delivery and credited her with drawing attention to an otherwise staid event, even if the "cost-benefit balance may not be too good."

"It could be a bit more modest," he added while facing the Paris InterContinental hotel atrium's verdant gold and ivory glass ceiling. "It is movement and pollution for nothing."

Logan said Washington was right to mend fences with Paris, given the country's interest in establishing more robust regional defense beyond the confines of American reach.

"Given France's role in encouraging greater European defense cooperation, maintaining strong relations after the mishandling of the AUKUS deal is and should be a priority for the Biden team's European outreach," Logan said.

"It trails in the background," said Mathieu Bock-Cote, a prominent political commentator, in an interview just a few miles from where Harris joined Macron to discuss the possibility of new elections in war-torn Libya.

The submarine deal remains a sore spot with ordinary French voters, who see an international snub and local job losses. One Paris resident called it a "typically American move."

Sent to calm troubled waters between the two countries, Harris faces caustic headwinds all of her own: plummeting poll numbers, an intractable policy portfolio that includes the border crisis, Democrats' frustration over voting rules, and foibles that have attracted intense media scrutiny.

Harris declined to answer part of a question from the *Washington Examiner* over how the trip had prepared her to take the wheel of the presidency. Biden has said publicly and privately that he intends to run for reelection, but he will turn 82 in 2024, and some Democrats are already casting an eye on the field of possible successors. Everything Harris does therefore takes on added importance.

"I will tell you that it was a very productive and a good trip, and we have a lot of follow-up to do," Harris told the *Washington Examiner*. "And as we discussed extensively over the past couple of days, this trip was about, of course, making clear the long-standing relationship, but also that as we go into a new era for the world, that our work will continue. And we do it with a sense of optimism, but a sense of strong conviction that the partnership between the United States and France remains and will continue to be a very strong one."

Harris came home to blistering headlines about her vice presidency that forced White House press secretary Jen Psaki to take to Twitter on Sunday night to defend her as a "vital partner" to Biden and a "bold leader" on important issues. Psaki reiterated her defense of Harris at Monday's White House press briefing.