

# Macron's charm offensive on Trump is part of his bid to lead Europe

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**They're an odd couple, but the French president hopes his trip to the White House will boost his authority within the EU.**

Can a 40-year-old French president, who gives sweeping speeches about Europe, singlehandedly save the global liberal order – and western democracy with it – by whispering into the ear of a 71-year-old US president who has only contempt for the European project and the values it is meant to uphold? To ask the question is perhaps to answer it.

Whether in Europe or in the US, the limelight surrounding Emmanuel Macron has produced hopes and anxieties in almost equal measure. Liberals love him as a poster boy for radical centrism in an age of democratic retrenchment and rampaging populism, while extremes on both left and right detect the threat he represents to their worldviews, and attack him for it. Like Donald Trump, Macron is well aware that he emerged from an era of polarisation. But the power these two men wield is, to say the least, very different.

Macron's first presidential trip to the US comes, unsurprisingly, cloaked in the narrative of French exceptionalism – that somehow France has a unique importance in the world – dispensed by the Élysée's spin doctors. There is nothing that flatters Gallic pride more than a French president on the global stage, alongside the leader of what remains the world's most powerful country.

That Macron and Trump make for a truly odd couple in both style and substance only adds more interest. With Britain all but out of the picture, not least as a result of Brexit, and Angela Merkel (who will in turn visit Trump on Friday) suffering from the wear and tear of 13 years in office as well as Trump's personal animosity, there are obvious opportunities for a French leader who knows how to make the most of his luck.

Whether Macron has any chance of persuading Trump on matters connected to Iran, trade or climate change remains an open question. Meanwhile, what's intriguing is the fascination this encounter has already produced, as well as a recent swell of quasi-postmortems written on this side of the Atlantic about Macron's European plans or his centrist credo – often dismissed as doomed or disingenuous.

Recent op-eds in the US waxed lyrical about Macron's latest speech on Europe, in which he spoke of the danger of "sleepwalking" [1] into the kind of nationalism that can foment a "form of civil war" [2]. Liberal America's trauma over Trump has apparently fostered a quest for saviours – even French ones. Macron's warning about the ghosts of Europe's past was highly topical, and also another attempt to claim leadership on the continent. If, as he told Fox News half-jokingly [3], his aim is to make France "great again", he knows that this can only be achieved by making Europe strong, and France strong within it. The stumbling blocks are arguably fewer in France (where support for strikes and protests against Macron's reform plans is waning) than in Germany.

It's likely that German doubts about his eurozone proposals [4] have further convinced Macron that a European political *aggiornamento* (revitalisation) is long overdue, and that he has to try to deliver it. The deadline is not Brexit (a grandiose mess he will spend a minimal amount of time trying to manage) but the May 2019 European parliament elections. No one yet knows how Macron will play his cards, especially now that his idea of pan-EU candidate lists has been rejected. But there is little doubt he will seek to duplicate at a European level the "neither left nor right" formula of political disruption that worked so well for him in France [5].

Against that backdrop, criticism levelled at Macron by the far left, like that from the far right, only serves his interest. The more radical those assaults, the better: they help him appear like a rational reformer. It also helps that, in the aftermath of the US-French-British strikes in Syria, the far left has been struggling to shake off its alignment with the far right in preferring to criticise western actions rather than those of autocrats and mass murderers.

It's true that Macron has little beyond speeches to show for his efforts to reboot Europe. But watch his manoeuvring with, say, the centrist Ciudadanos in Spain (now much stronger than Podemos), or his tactics aimed at dividing the European mainstream right [6], parts of which flirt openly with neo-fascists in Hungary and elsewhere. However questionable, Macron's domestic asylum and immigration policies are calculated to occupy the middle ground.

This trip to the US is a boon to the French president, and not just because of the pomp of a state dinner in the White House. Macron is throwing himself into the lion's den of an American presidency that represents a real danger to Europe. Trump is at the same time a strategic threat (upending the Iran nuclear deal), an economic threat (think trade wars) and an ideological threat (remember how the Front National's Marion Maréchal-Le Pen appeared at a recent gathering of US conservatives [7]). The Macron-Trump "bromance" makes for good headlines, but it hardly camouflages Europe's vulnerability to US whims. The continent's weakness is made worse by exposure to regional forces it can't control, and can only hope to address by harnessing US might.

What all this boils down to is that Macron's European ambitions depend not only on his domestic reform agenda, but also on the extent to which he is able to raise his profile in Washington, and draw credibility from that in Europe. Macron is well aware that his presidency was made possible by the 1958 Gaullist constitution, which allows the circumventing of established parties and the rise of an outsider (he enjoys describing himself and Trump as "mavericks").

He also knows that the French yearn for a leader with authority, and that Europeans want protection. He believes that coming under attack from both left and right, and resisting that pressure, helps to secure his position in Europe.

"The answer is not authoritarian democracy but the authority of democracy," Macron said in his Strasbourg speech. Whether Trump fully understands any of this is an entirely different matter, of course. In private, Macron surely smiles about that. He believes he is playing a weak European hand shrewdly, and he's confident he is only just started. It is perhaps a historical paradox for a Frenchman, but Macron's road to Europe goes through Washington.

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## **P.S.**

\* The Guardian. Tue 24 Apr 2018 18.51 BST Last modified on Thu 26 Apr 2018 10.20 BST:  
<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/24/macron-charm-trump-lead-europe-french-president>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.washingtonpost.com>

[2] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/18/opinion/macron-europe-democracy-threatened.html>

[3] <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2018/04/22/president-macron-on-relations-with-us-syria-and-russia.html>

[4] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-europe/german-minister-praises-macrons-courage-in-proposing-euro-zone-reforms-idUSKBN1HN2PH>

[5] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/may/07/emmanuel-macron-wins-french-presidency-marine-le-pen>

[6] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-parliament-macron/macron-effect-stirs-eu-parliament-ahead-of-elections-idUSKBN1HN25I>

[7] <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/22/marine-le-pen-cpac-speech-2018-france-far-right>