

# On French foreign policy - Trump and Macron: tangoing in Paris

Sunday 23 July 2017, by [RAM Susan](#) (Date first published: 16 July 2017).

Macron's lovefest with Trump rests on a raft of converging policies, writes Susan Ram. The decision by Emmanuel Macron, France's new president, to install Donald Trump as guest of honour at the 2017 Bastille Day parade in Paris caught the usual suspects by surprise. As the mainstream media, pundits and think tank 'experts' sought to make sense of the puzzling turn, Macron spun his own storyline: the visit was designed to prevent the isolation of a "precious historical ally" and bring him back into the international fold. This conformed agreeably with the prevailing mainstream media narrative: that of Macron the visionary, his gaze fixed unflinchingly on a horizon of green energy, international cooperation and dynamic ruptures with old ways.

For Trump, the invitation must have come as manna. After trips to Brussels and Hamburg marred by demonstrators, and the humiliating further postponement of that gilded carriage ride through London, Paris must have shimmered beguilingly and irresistibly. Here at last was a chance to wallow in imperial pomp within the citadel of European haute culture! And be guest of honour on Bastille Day (whatever that might be): well, this was the sort of thing being US President was really about.

But Trump, ever the businessman in search of a deal, must have detected more to the trip than opportunities for showmanship, handshakes and fine dining. That Macron issued the invitation in late June, before the G20 summit at Hamburg, suggests a game plan reaching beyond climate change to more basic issues of power and global reach. A closer look at the direction of Macron's agenda, especially in relation to military spending and foreign policy, reveals important areas of convergence with Trump's own grand designs.

Significantly, the election campaigns of both leaders featured pledges to change direction in foreign policy. Trump made comments critical of NATO, hinting that the US might not automatically come to the aid of members who were not paying their stipulated share (2% of GDP). Apparently chummy towards Putin, he also put it about that he favoured cooperation with Assad and Russia to defeat Islamic State in Syria. Macron, too, campaigned with an olive twig at the ready: he dropped the demand for Assad's departure as a condition of any Syrian peace settlement, pledged to improve ties with Russia, and vowed to "end this sort of ne-conservatism that has been imported to France over the last ten years."

Since entering office, both leaders have been briskly pedalling away from such dovish postures. Trump's track record here is already familiar, but Macron's, more artfully disguised, is no less a departure from vote-winning rhetoric.

As if echoing Trump's announcement, early in his presidency, of a jaw-dropping 9% jump in the US military budget, Macron has pledged a great leap forward in military spending, aimed at getting France compliant with the NATO-decreed target of 2% of GDP by 2025 (against 1.7% at present). France's defence spending will increase by 1.5 billion euros in 2018 – "a considerable effort, considering the current context of budgetary constraints", as Macron concedes.

Bilateral talks with German Chancellor Angela Merkel at the beginning of July yielded a Franco-German 'European Defence' initiative, promising closer cooperation in the fight against terrorism, a plan to build "a new generation of joint fighter jets" for domestic use and export, and full steam ahead for Europe's first military drone programme, projected to start operation in 2025.

In line with Trump's invocations to "make America great again", Macron seems intent on aggrandising France's standing in the world. The chosen route involves displacing the UK as America's "special relationship" by assuming the role of prime regional lieutenant in NATO. This is seen to bring both political and economic advantages. For one thing, it offers the opportunity to further instrumentalise the repercussions of jihadist attacks on French soil, whether by incorporating key Emergency powers into the law of the land or by intensified demonisation of French Muslims. The prospects for peace, reconciliation and tackling domestic terrorism at its roots aren't looking promising in Macron's France.

In relation to climate change, too, Macron's shapeshifting abilities mask a hard-headed, business-friendly approach not averse to compromise. At the Hamburg G20 summit, the novice president went out of his way to achieve a closing statement that was (as the journalist Bruno Odent put it) "Trump compatible". When paralysis threatened to hold up the whole summit communique, Macron reportedly asked "PM May to step outside with him, Trump and Turnbull to agree a form of words which allowed the 19 to express their support for Paris in the strongest possible terms, with the US stating its own position." The latter included a statement of endeavour "to work closely with other countries to help them access and use fossil fuels more clearly and efficiently" - a reference to Trump's hopes of boosting US gas exports.

During his Bastille Day visit, Trump rewarded Macron with the tantalising words:

*"Something could happen with respect to the Paris Accord... we'll see what happens... if it happens that will be wonderful, if it doesn't happen that will be OK too."*

Few were holding their breath on this one, least of all those gathering in Paris to protest Trump's visit. Various factors contributed to the limited nature of the mobilisation, which seemed far removed, both in scale and organisation, from the sort of 'welcome' Trump would have been accorded in London. For a start, mid-July is well into the French holiday season, with many prospective protestors (students; workers and employees still able to afford a holiday) absent from the capital. For this reason, a major trade union mobilisation against Macron's assault on labour protection laws and a social security system that, like Britain's, dates back to the immediate post-war period, is scheduled for September 12, well after 'la rentrée': the post-holiday general 'return'.

But seasonal factors provide only part of the explanation. While contempt for Trump's misogyny, racism, climate change denial and oafish ways is widespread in France, the absence of a strong, nationally active anti-war movement contributes to a situation where imperialism seems rarely discussed outside radical Left circles. As a result, the wider dangers posed by Trump-style visions of world domination, militarisation and war in the service of big capital attract limited attention.

Jean-Luc Mélenchon responded to news of the visit by deploring the fact it was going ahead:

*"Trump is not at all welcome at our July 14 national day ... which celebrates the liberty of the French. Trump is a man of violence; he's got nothing to do with that celebration. Of course, when he comes he'll be welcomed in a dignified way, because he's the President of the United States. But no, he's not welcome, that's clear... He represents NATO and the subjugation of our nation to an international coalition where it has no role to play."*

Mobilisation against the visit came from a movement brought together by the recently formed Front Social, a coalition of trade unionists (including fighting sections of the CGT), student activists, participants from last year's Nuit Debout people's assemblies, NGOs and other groups. Marching from the Place de Clichy to the Porte de la Chapelle, hundreds of protestors (including significant numbers of American residents of Paris [1]) raised lively and inventive slogans against three targets: Macron's labour law 'reform; the presence of Trump, and the ongoing, quasi-permanent State of Emergency.

No one seemed to harbour illusions about Macron. "Sous les sourires de playboy, Macron nous prépare une politique bien pire que celles de Sarkozy et de Hollande," was how one demonstrator put it. ("Beneath his playboy smile, Macron is preparing policies that'll be even worse for us than those of Sarkozy and Hollande".)

Such fears of social regression are well founded. On July 10, Macron's centre-Right Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, let drop the news that the government was considering introducing tax breaks for the wealthy as early as next year. Small wonder that the Trump-Macron tango in Paris was so deftly in step.

**Susan Ram**

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\* Counterfire. July 16, 2017:

<http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/19101-trump-and-macron-tangoing-in-paris>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] In fact, American residents in Paris mobilized against Trump before the Front social move. (ESSF).