



**FRANCE – U.S. RELATIONSHIP UNDER
TRUMP 2.0:
NO BIG DRAMA OR TURBO-CHARGED
CONFRONTATION?**

BY LOÏC SIMONET

AUTHOR

Dr. Loïc Simonet

started his career at the French Defence Ministry in Paris. In 2008, he was appointed Politico-Military Counsellor of the French Permanent Representation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna. In 2013, he joined the Secretariat of the OSCE as Senior External Co-operation Officer, until June 2021. In this capacity, he liaised with the European Union and NATO. In 2021, he joined the Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip) as a Researcher.

IMPRESSUM:

Österreichisches Institut für Internationale Politik – oiip,
Austrian Institute for International Affairs
A-1090 Vienna, Währinger Straße 3/12,
www.oiip.ac.at, info@oiip.ac.at

Copyright © 2025

FRANCE – U.S. RELATIONSHIP UNDER TRUMP 2.0: NO BIG DRAMA OR TURBO-CHARGED CONFRONTATION?

In 2018, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the end of the first World War, Emmanuel Macron, the French President, gifted Donald Trump with a young oak tree from Belleau Wood, where 1,800 American soldiers lost their lives during the first World War. The tree soon died. Macron insisted that no analogies to the Franco-American relationship should be drawn, stating, “It’s no big drama, the symbol was to plant it together.” (RFI, 2019).

From Lafayette to Tocqueville, from General de Gaulle to Dominique de Villepin, France and the United States are linked by a long history that goes to the heart of their universalist values. But the relationship has not always been simple; rather “a rich drama with many chapters” (Lightfoot & Bel, 2020, 4). France’s dilemma in 2017 was: “Is Trump a revolutionary actor or a noisy status quo president?” (Lightfoot, 2018, 7). Seven years later, the answer suffers no ambiguity.

Unlike many EU members and NATO allies, France views Trump’s foreign policy with a certain *détachement* and regards it as ‘business as usual’—just as it already felt relatively comfortable with Trump’s America in 2017 (Zajac, 2018). On the morning of 6 November 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron was one of the first world leaders to congratulate the president-elect. The Washington Post’s columnist David Ignatius says he found a “surprising mood of acceptance” in Paris. Joe Biden’s presidency has certainly not been the ‘oasis’ of transatlantic harmony that many naively predicted, between the abrupt and uncoordinated U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the AUKUS humiliation and the Inflation Reduction Act. This might also explain why Benjamin Haddad, France’s Deputy Minister for European Affairs, pragmatically assessed: “We worked with the first Trump administration, and we will work with the second. (...) You have to be emotionally neutral about what’s out

of your control” (quoted by Ignatius, 2024). To paraphrase a recent Policy Paper of the Notre Europe Foundation, for France, it is not about the Good (Democrats) or the Bad (Republicans), but just the Ugly (Bertolini & Fabry, 2024).

Having said that, Trump’s foreign policy views could hardly be more at odds with France’s current ‘global agenda’, which emphasizes accel-



*France views Trump’s foreign policy with a certain *détachement* and regards it as ‘business as usual’*

erated green transition, environmental protection initiatives, global finance regulation, and multi-lateral governance revitalization (Tenenbaum, 2024, 13). Most of these divergences are likely to be turbo-charged during Trump’s second mandate. An opinion poll on 7 November 2024 on “The French and the election of Donald Trump” showed that 62% of French people are worried, with only 12% satisfied. 8 out of 10 French people have a poor image of Donald Trump, including the voters of the far-right Rassemblement National (56%). In both domestic and foreign policy, 85% of French people expect Donald Trump to lead a policy of rupture. 48% of French people think that with the election of Donald Trump, relations between the United States and France will deteriorate, and 44% that they will not change. Only 7% expect relations between the two countries to improve (ELABE, 2024).

France, which might well be considered the least ‘Atlanticist’ country in the transatlantic community, with its NATO-skeptic past and its aspiration



A lot will depend on the relationship forged between the two presidents during Trump's first mandate, and on Macron's ability to use 'flattery diplomacy'

to European strategic autonomy, has a vested interest in an understanding with Washington. What will it make out of Trump's victory?

A lot will depend on the relationship forged between the two presidents during Trump's first mandate, since French and American leaders have a long history of using personal diplomacy to reach agreement on divisive issues.

Macron l'Américain¹

The two men know each other well. Columnist Megan McArdle of the Washington Post has once disserted on two presidents who “can appear so politically similar despite such wildly different philosophical commitments” (McArdle, 2018). “Macron is the president Trump wishes he could be”, her colleague Ishaan Tharoor overemphasized (Tharoor, 2017).

Compared with other European leaders, notably German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron seemed to get along quite well with the mercurial Trump at the time. Macron was the first foreign leader in the Trump presidency to receive full state visitor treatment, including a lavish dinner at the White House on 24 April 2018.

Macron made intensive use of “flattery diplomacy” (Statler, 2023) to sweet-talk Trump into upholding important multilateral commitments near and dear to Macron's heart, specifically the 2015 Paris Climate Accords and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

agreements with Iran. At the same time, unlike other foreign leaders who seemed to play the supplicant to the unpredictable American president, Macron has never been afraid to push or talk back, attracting Trump's insulting tweets, like in 2019 when he stigmatized the loss of American leadership leading to “the brain death of NATO” (The Economist, 2019). This Janus-faced approach—at once warm and friendly to Mr. Trump but at the same time keeping his options open (Rubin & Nossiter, 2018)—in some ways reflects the French love-hate relationship with the United States. The French President has always been the thorn in Trump's heel. He always resisted Trump's ‘America first,’ be it at his speech to Congress on 25 April 2018 or at the United Nations General Assembly a few months later.

Macron's strategy proved unsuccessful in the short term. However, many American officials and citizens appreciated Macron's efforts at the time, as did world public opinion. By skirting a complete break in Franco- American relations, the French President kept the main items on his international agenda on life support until they could be nursed back to a healthier state.

Will Trump 2.0 offer the Élysée's tenant a status of the same order, like a “comédie de remariage” (Duclos, 2024)? The fact that Trump already knows Macron is undoubtedly an advantage. Not so for German Chancellor Olaf Scholz or British Prime Minister Keir Starmer. Trump's comeback should be viewed as validating the original French perspective about Europe's sovereignty and strategic

1 I borrow to Pothier, 2018.

autonomy—a sort of “I told you so” sentiment (Tenenbaum, 2024, 13). As he did during Trump 1.0, Emmanuel Macron could therefore set himself up as the default leader of the international liberal order and a certain idea of the transatlantic link in an attempt to influence his American counterpart and limit the damage of a likely disruptive presidency.

A lonely and dangerous stretch for Europe

However, many things have changed, which make the stakes higher for the French-U.S. relationship:

- Washington is looking less and less at the Old Continent. The Indo-Pacific shift has become a strategic reality that now transcends the partisan divide between Republicans and Democrats. America is obsessed with its economic battle with Beijing, over which the U.S. “prioritize(s) maintaining an enduring competitive edge” (The White House, 2022, 23).
- Donald Trump’s election came at the worst possible time for Europe. Economic growth is sluggish and leadership has stalled. Mario Draghi’s resounding report on The future of European competitiveness, in September 2024 (Draghi, 2024), pinpointed the Eurozone’s economic stall. According to Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank, “Europe is falling behind, and so is France” (Albert, Escande & Madeline, 2024 – I translate). In contrast, the U.S. economy is doing well, and the gap that has widened between the U.S. and Europe is becoming a chasm. The European continent is at war. Ultimately, Trump’s election might serve as a wakeup call for Europeans, but this call comes a bit too soon.
- Faced with a politically strengthened Donald Trump, Emmanuel Macron is weakened by seven years in power and a failed parliamentary dissolution, to

such an extent that calls for his resignation are multiplying. He no longer has the same freedom to maneuver. And “Trump is a shark; when he smells blood, he wounds to death”, Nicole Bacharan, expert on French-American relations, warns (quoted by Faure, 2024 – I translate). Moreover, Trump 2.0 could have a further destabilizing effect on the French political stage and enhance the appeal of far-right movements in Europe.

- Finally, the Franco-German couple, the traditional anchors of the European Union, has lately experienced a low point. Although E. Macron and O. Scholtz held immediate talks after Trump’s victory to coordinate their position, it is notorious that Paris and Berlin have held differing views on various issues in recent years. Whereas France, the champion of strategic autonomy, advocates the establishment of a tough balance of power with Washington, Germany has no desire to open a new front with the United States, at a time when the country is going through an unprecedented economic and political crisis, and Scholtz is desperately trying to save his coalition in the run-up to federal elections.

France will only have credibility in Washington if it appears—at least on certain issues—as the spokesperson for the whole of Europe. But there will be obstacles on its path.

France is likely to be less inclined towards engaging in purely transactional relations. This divergence in approach may lead to tensions between Paris and other capitals regarding the level of compliance with U.S. demands. Instead of positioning France at the center of the game, this could potentially isolate Paris within Europe (Tenenbaum, 2024, 13) and lead to a general fragmentation of the continent (Quencez, 2024).

Perfectly aware of this European ‘kaleidoscope’, Donald Trump will not hesitate to press the finger where it hurts, in every capital, hoping to divide the Twenty-Seven. Europe and France might find themselves caught in the “who is not with me is against me” kind of blackmail, be it on the alignment of Europe with US China policy—a ‘vassalization’ Macron has not been willing to cope with—the increased purchase of U.S. industrial and military capabilities, or an approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict aligned with that of Mr. Netanyahu.

Among Europeans, new players might fight for leadership or at least influence. Giorgia Meloni, the President of the Italian Council of Ministers, might play a constructive role in the new diplomatic relationship between the EU and the USA. Meloni’s closeness to Elon Musk when the latter presented her with the Atlantic Council’s Global Citizen Award on 23 September 2024 was not lost on anyone. As for Viktor Orbán of Hungary, he considers the new American president a ‘brother in arms’.

But France may also be able to forge new alliances.

One possible one is with Poland, Europe’s emerging military power. The country has been deprived of its Atlanticist compass, as well as some of the EU member states most committed to supporting Ukraine. “Europe urgently needs to take more responsibility for its security”, Radek Sikorski, the Polish Defense Minister, tweeted after Trump’s victory. As Poland took over the Council of the EU’s presidency at the beginning of January 2025, Paris has been seeking military rapprochement with Warsaw (Hoorman & Vincent, 2025). United Kingdom could as well come back as the EU’s clear defense partner.

For the time being, France, just like the whole international community, is in a cautious “wait

and see” position. Inviting the president-elect to the reopening ceremony on Notre-Dame cathedral on 7 December 2024 was a diplomatic masterpiece, like in 2017 when the U.S. President had been invited by Emmanuel Macron to attend the grand July 14th military parade on the Champs-Élysées. At the same time, French authorities made things clear. Jean-Noël Barrot, the French Foreign Minister, warned that his country would not stand idly in the face of Donald Trump’s protectionist measures. “If the Trump administration were to persist in what I have described as a major error, then we will defend our agricultural, industrial and commercial interests with an iron will and without trembling,” he said on 12 November 2024 (La Tribune.fr, 2024b – I translate). The then Minister for Industry, Marc Ferracci, also assessed that Europe must prepare to establish “a commercial and economic balance of power” with Donald Trump’s future administration (Le Figaro with AFP, 2024 – I translate).

No big drama, Macron said. Let’s observe whether Trump’s second mandate will prove the French President right. Let’s see if the symbol of the Belleau Wood oak can be transformed into an opportunity for France-



Trump's election might serve as a wakeup call for Europeans, but this comes at a bad time for the 'old continent'

America relations, and whether the ‘new’ Donald Trump can eventually do Europe and France a favor (Karnitschnig, 2024).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Albert E., Escande P. & Madeline B. (2024). Christine Lagarde, présidente de la BCE : « Le décrochage de l'Europe est une réalité, celui de la France aussi ». Le Monde. https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2024/10/31/christine-lagarde-presidente-de-la-bce-le-decrochage-de-l-europe-est-une-realite-celui-de-la-france-aussi_6368399_3234.html.

Bertolini M. & Fabry E. (2024). Harris vs. Trump on Trade Policy: The Good, the Bad, or Just Ugly? Notre Europe / Institut Jacques Delors, Policy Paper 306. https://institutdelors.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/PP306_Politique_commerciale_USA_Harris_Trump_Fabry_EN.pdf.

Duclos M. (2024). [Trump II] - Quel nouveau partenariat entre la France et les États-Unis ? Institut Montaigne. <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/expressions/trump-ii-quel-nouveau-partenariat-diplomatique-avec-paris>.

Draghi M. (2024). The future of European competitiveness. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en#paragraph_47059.

The Economist (2019). Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead. <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead>.

ELABE (2024). Les Français et l'élection de Donald Trump. Sondage pour BFMTV, 7 Nov. 2024. https://elabe.fr/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/07112024_elabe_bfmtv_les-francais-et-lelection-de-donald-trump.pdf.

Faure J. (2024). À quelle relation s'attendre entre Emmanuel Macron et Donald Trump, 4 ans après leur première collaboration ? TF1 Info. <https://www.tf1info.fr/politique/presidentielle-americaaine-a-quelle-relation-s-attendre-entre-emmanuel-macron-et-donald-trump-quatre-ans-apres-leur-premiere-collaboration-2332629.html>.

Le Figaro with AFP (2024). Marc Ferracci prévoit un « rapport de force commercial et économique » avec Donald Trump. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/conjoncture/marc-ferracci-prevoit-un-rapport-de-force-commercial-et-economique-avec-donald-trump-20241107>.

Hoorman C. & Vincent E. (2025). Paris seeks military rapprochement with Warsaw. Le Monde, 15 Jan. 2025. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2025/01/15/paris-seeks-military-rapprochement-with-warsaw_6737069_4.html.

Ignatius D. (2024). Europe comes to terms with the Trump restoration. The Washington Post, 21 Nov. 2024. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/11/21/europe-germany-france-nato-trump-return/>.

Karnitschnig M. (2024). Donald Trump just did Europe a favor. Politico. <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-just-did-europe-a-favor/>.

McArdle M. (2018). Lessons from the limping Trump and Macron revolutions. The Washington Post, 30 Nov. 2018.

Pothier F. (2018). Macron l'Américain. *Survival*, 60(3). 105-111.

Quencez M. (2024). US-French Relations After the US Election. German Marshall Fund. <https://www.gmfus.org/news/us-french-relations-after-us-election>.

RFI (2019). Donald's stump: France to send another tree to US after oak dies. 12 June 2019. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/france/20190612-tree-death-no-big-drama-france-send-another-us-after-oak-dies>.

Rubin A. J. & Nossiter A. (2018). Cozying Up to Trump, Macron Gets Little Reward. *The New York Times*, 23 April 2018.

Statler K. C. (2023). Death-Grip Handshakes and Flattery Diplomacy. The Macron- Trump Connection and Its Larger Implications for Alliance Politics. Chap. 22 in: Jervis R. et al. (Ed.) *Chaos Reconsidered: The Liberal Order and the Future of International Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press. 248-259.

Tenenbaum E. (2024). France: Trump and the prospects for European strategic sovereignty. In: Von Daniels L., Major C. & Von Ondarza N. (Ed.). *How Europe is preparing for Trump II. European Perspectives on potential consequences and the policy areas most affected*. SWP, Working Paper. 13. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/arbeitspapiere/European_Perspectives_on_Trump_II_WP_von_Daniels_Major_von_Ondarza.pdf.

Tharoor I. (2017). Macron is the president Trump wishes he could be. *The Washington Post*, 13 July 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/13/macron-is-the-president-trump-wishes-he-could-be/>.

La Tribune.fr (2024b). Protectionnisme de Trump : la France « défendra ses intérêts ». <https://www.la-tribune.fr/economie/international/protectionnisme-de-trump-la-france-defendra-ses-interets-1011175.html>.

The White House (2022). *National Security Strategy*. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.

Zajac P. (2018). Why France Feels (relatively) Comfortable with Trump's America. *The American Interest*. <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2018/04/23/france-feels-relatively-comfortable-trumps-america/>.

