

**Selected Aspects of France's Foreign Policy towards
the United States during Emmanuel Macron's
Presidency from 2017 to 2022**

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Abstract:

The French diplomatic tradition has been going on for centuries and has influenced other parts of the world. One of France's most essential foreign policy directions is relations between France and the United States. It can be said to be friendship and hatred at the same time. The deep-rooted anti-Americanism in the French and the desire by Paris to return to great power status makes these relations even more difficult. In this article, I review France's foreign policy toward the United States from 2017 to 2022. In particular, I focus on analysing the aspect of superpower status, NATO membership and UN membership. I prove that these aspects have the greatest impact on Franco-American relations.

Keywords: foreign policy, France, United States, Emmanuel Macron presidency

Introduction

In the 21st century, when the world is so interconnected, it would be almost impossible for state institutions to operate efficiently without foreign policy. France is an example of a country with one of the longest diplomatic traditions with other countries. Although France is active on almost the entire international stage, its relationship with the United States can be regarded as unique. Relations between France and the US are one of the most complicated and, at the same time, the most interesting in the world. The interdependencies that exist between the two countries, due to their activity and coexistence in Western civilisation, means that a common policy has to be pursued regardless of mutual sympathies or antipathies.

This article describes selected aspects of France's foreign policy that were relevant in relations with the United States between 2017 and 2022. The chosen period in French history - Emmanuel Macron's first term - is not coincidental. Macron is the youngest president of the Fifth Republic; broke the duopoly of the neo-Gaullists and the Socialists; and was not exactly known,

which makes his actions on the international stage even more interesting. In addition, during this period, a world immersed in wars, pandemics and advancing globalisation reviewed many aspects of foreign policy and identified priorities that world leaders must pay special attention to when pursuing a foreign policy.

Foreign policy – theoretical aspects

Foreign policy is an indispensable part of the functioning of a state. It enables a country to fulfil the *raison d'état*, pursue its interests and strengthen its position on the international stage. The very definition of a phenomenon such as foreign policy is one of the very complex and heterogeneous concepts that characterise the social sciences. One of the reasons for the problems with a clear definition is its multifaceted nature encompassing both what is inside and what is outside the state. This is why, to this day, we do not have a single, commonly used definition of the phenomenon. According to Ziemowit Jacek Pietraś, foreign policy is nothing but the process of formulation and implementation of the state's extra-political goals, reflecting the interests of the nation and its constituent parts (Pietraś, 1997). The former national security adviser and former secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, recognised that foreign policy begins when the domestic policy ends (Kissinger, 1966). Currently, foreign policy should be understood through the concepts of hard power and soft power. Hard power consists of trying to force another actor in international relations to act a certain way. Soft power, on the other hand, achieves the same goal and influences other actors without forceful action. It relates to cultural, economic or political activities. Soft power is now considered a much more effective method of conducting foreign policy (Czornik, 2017).

When it comes to foreign policy, it is impossible to omit concepts such as national interest or *raison d'état* (this phrase comes from the French, demonstrating France's role in the field of diplomacy). The national interest is most often invoked by representatives of political realism, defined by Hans J. Morgenthau as a struggle for power (Morgenthau, 1948; Więclawski, 2011). The promoters of the national interests of individual states are not only the rulers, the bodies responsible for conducting foreign policy, or the diplomats - they are also the people living in the country. A category directly linked to national interest is the concept of *raison d'état*. Unfortunately, there are often oversimplifications or misunderstandings in the definition of this concept, because *raison d'état* is often treated as a tool of manipulation convenient for the authorities, who alone can decide what is and what is not *raison d'état*. This is very shallow and

erroneous thinking. Often citizens are only confronted with the concept of *raison d'état* during crises within the state, conflicts or tense situations. This suggests that *raison d'état* is linked to the category of security. The term itself derives from the Latin *ratio status*. The precursor of this approach was the Florentine philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli. In "The Prince," *ratio status* stemmed from the ruler's will. It meant that the state interest was the overriding interest and that, in significant cases, the good of individuals could be sacrificed for the good of politics (Raburski, 2012).

France's main foreign policy determinants

The factors and conditions determining a country's foreign policy vary. Generally, their shape remains unchanged, while some redefinition may occur due to particular historical events or trends in the international environment. The redefinition of French foreign policy is seen in the collapse of the French Colonial Empire. It eventually collapsed with Vanuatu's declaration of independence in 1980. For more than 400 years, France as a coloniser had maintained considerable influence in various parts of the world. Among other things, the present-day American states of Louisiana and Florida were once French colonies and were only bought back from the French to the USA in 1803 and 1819 respectively. The beginning of the end of the French colonial empire came after the Second World War. The French position was not improved by the suppression of demonstrations in Algeria in 1945, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of Algerians. After the collapse of colonialism, France's position declined decisively, forcing a redefinition of foreign policy and an attempt to retain influence in formerly colonised areas.

The change in the world order, the fall of the 'Iron Curtain,' and the emergence in Europe of many new actors in international relations also forced Paris to reflect on the shape of French foreign policy after the Cold War. Of course, among the universal determinants of states' foreign policy, researchers mention factors such as territory, population, scientific and technological potential, the evolution of the international environment, and the nature of the commitments made by the state or international law. It is important to underline that security issues, international alliances, and the European Union, are very important for France today. However, another element that has been present in France's foreign policy since the time of Charles de Gaulle is superpower status. These issues are worth emphasising in particular because of the war

in Ukraine, the aggressive policies of Russia and China, and the presidency of Donald Trump, which ended in 2021.

Superpower status in France's foreign policy

Superpower status has been a feature of the Fifth Republic's policy since it was created. It is also one that is inextricably linked to France's foreign policy. Although this vision of the French state as a superpower was so popular during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle, it is also being realised on the threshold of the third decade of the 21st century. The question of France's superpower status is inextricably linked to its policy toward the United States. It is the country that, after the Second World War, has consistently remained a leader on the international stage, initially as the leader of the capitalist bloc and, after the collapse of the Cold War order, as the world's sole and independent hyperpower. That is why General Charles de Gaulle created the vision of 'taking France to the top.'

The first demonstration of independence from the US in the context of a superpower status was France's departure from the NATO alliance in 1966 following a dispute over US control of nuclear weapons deployed on French territory. De Gaulle's departure from NATO was a clear signal to the United States that France could do without the largely US-led alliance (Żurawski vel Grajewski, 2019). Another event when France wanted to mark its high position in the world was the first Iraqi war, in which the French became involved. President Mitterrand said at the time that France was so active in this matter because it was carrying out its duties as a great power (Lakomy, 2012). These words sound rather grotesque, given the contribution of the coalition countries to the conflict. The Americans sent almost 700,000 troops, who were in charge of Operation Desert Storm, so it was Washington that was implementing the great power policy rather than France (only several thousand members of the Armée de Terre made their contribution to the first Iraqi war).

France is definitely no longer a global power. It is listed as a regional power of Europe in a formal, selective, military, or cultural sense. It is worth focusing on this last designation. France is mentioned as one of the first when it comes to cultural powers. France has an enormous cultural wealth - language (once the language of the aristocracy), literature, painting, music, film, and the art of diplomacy. After the Second World War, the United States advanced to the position of greatest cultural power. This was due to the explosive growth of the mass culture. The film

industry has been largely dominated by Hollywood, and the most prominent music hits have been made in the US for years.

Emmanuel Macron interrupted the long tradition of exchanging authority between two parties; however, he has not entirely abandoned the policies pursued by his predecessors. Macron has modified the notion of superpower. For example, it can be seen in his Twitter activity, where the President of France regularly shares his insights with internet users. Macron has used the word *puissance* (meaning power, might) in relation to the European Union nine times and in the context of the French Republic only five times since his victory in the presidential election in 2017. This fact may lead one to conclude that Macron has redefined the concept of 'superpower,' being aware of France's inability to compete with powers such as the US or China. Another conclusion is that the French can build their power in the international area only through European Union and Macron knows that. Just before the first round of the presidential election, Emmanuel Macron tweeted that France needs a transatlantic friendship (with the United States); however, it must be a policy of independence and strength. This tweet during the campaign announced the continuation of the superpower status policy towards the US. It means emphasising the sovereignty, independence, and power of the French state. France wants to influence different parts of the world as a military power (6th army in the world). In 2016, the French company concluded an agreement with Australia. The object of this agreement was to build a fleet of conventional submarines worth €56 billion. In 2021 it turned out that the Australians had signed a similar agreement with the US and the UK. It meant that they made the contract with the French invalid. As a country with huge aspirations, France felt insulted by this act. Emmanuel Macron set a weighty tone to the situation. The president took decisive action and recalled the French ambassadors from the US and Australia, with the result that bilateral relations were getting worse and worse. It showed that position of the French state was not as high as Macron expected.

Superpower status policy has always been present in French foreign policy. And it is also implemented by Emmanuel Macron. However, he has made a change. He is not building his power on France, whose position is declining. He wants to be in the decision-making circle thanks to the European Union, which plays a more prominent role than France itself.

NATO in France's foreign policy

France is one of the founders of NATO. At the beginning of the Alliance, The Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe was located in France. However, the dominance of the US and the UK was increasingly evident, which caused great dissatisfaction on the part of General de Gaulle. The Americans and British rejected the French President's proposal about making a tripartite leadership of NATO (France wanted to be the third country). Charles de Gaulle also wanted to gain control over American nuclear weapons in France, but this demand failed to achieve the desired results. The decision for France to leave NATO was maturing for a long time, until 1966, when the Alliance lost one of its most prominent members ([Ambassade de France en Pologne, 2020](#)).

Although France has not been an official member of NATO for years, this does not mean that it has not cooperated with the organisation. An important thing is the participation of French soldiers in operations such as IFOR, SFOR, ISAF, Kosovo Force, Deliberate Force, or Deny Flight. In 2009, France rejoined NATO thanks to the efforts of Nicolas Sarkozy. It occurred during the NATO summit in Strasbourg and is undeniably one of the most important moments in modern French history. It also confirmed the change in Franco-American relations that President Sarkozy postulated from the beginning of his presidency. Cooperation was shown during the joint mission against Kaddafi's regime in Libya.

When François Hollande won the elections in 2012, relations were as complicated as before Sarkozy. The reason was the approach of the new president to NATO. Hollande had already announced during the campaign that he would be taking French troops out of Afghanistan. At his first NATO summit, he declared to Barack Obama that his position was not negotiable. The real test for Franco-American relations was the civil war in Syria and an attitude towards the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. Both France and the US declared combat readiness to intervene in Syria subject to UN Security Council approval - but there was no such approval. A similar convergence could be observed in the stance towards ISIS - French and US aircraft carried out air strikes in areas controlled by the terrorists. Both countries bet on cooperation during this difficult time ([Parzymies, 2017](#)).

When Emmanuel Macron came to power in 2017, it was not entirely clear what political discourse he would adopt in relation to NATO and the US. Macron became famous for his statement in an interview with *The Economist* in 2019 about the 'brain death of NATO.' At that time, he also said that he was not sure whether the Article 5 procedure of the Washington Treaty

would actually work. He added that Europe could no longer rely on the United States. Thus, Macron suggested the need to build a European security system (Żurawski vel Grajewski, 2019). Macron addressed NATO in a speech on 4 December 2019 from London. This speech highlighted the evolution of the US position on NATO in the context of Donald Trump's attitude. President of France paid attention to the problem of the Americans reducing their spending on NATO and, consequently, asking European countries to increase their spending. He also expressed the need to set strategic goals for the Alliance, which he believes is a duty to soldiers and citizens (Macron, 2019). It is possible that such a sceptical attitude of Macron toward NATO was caused by the person of Donald Trump. Two years later, just one month into the presidency of Democrat Joe Biden, Macron completely changed the tone of his official statements. Indeed, at the Munich Conference, he said that although he believed in European defence, this did not mean that he wanted separation from the US. At the time, Macron said "I do believe in NATO" (Reuters, 2019).

An important test for NATO unity was the Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24th February 2022. Although Emmanuel Macron showed a rather sceptical statement and was accused by the public opinion of being pro-Russian, he agreed with Joe Biden on most issues. NATO's strategy was fairly uniform both in terms of military aid, the imposition of sanctions (here there were problems with some members of the European Union), and in condemning acts of Russian aggression such as the Bucha massacre.

United Nations in France's foreign policy

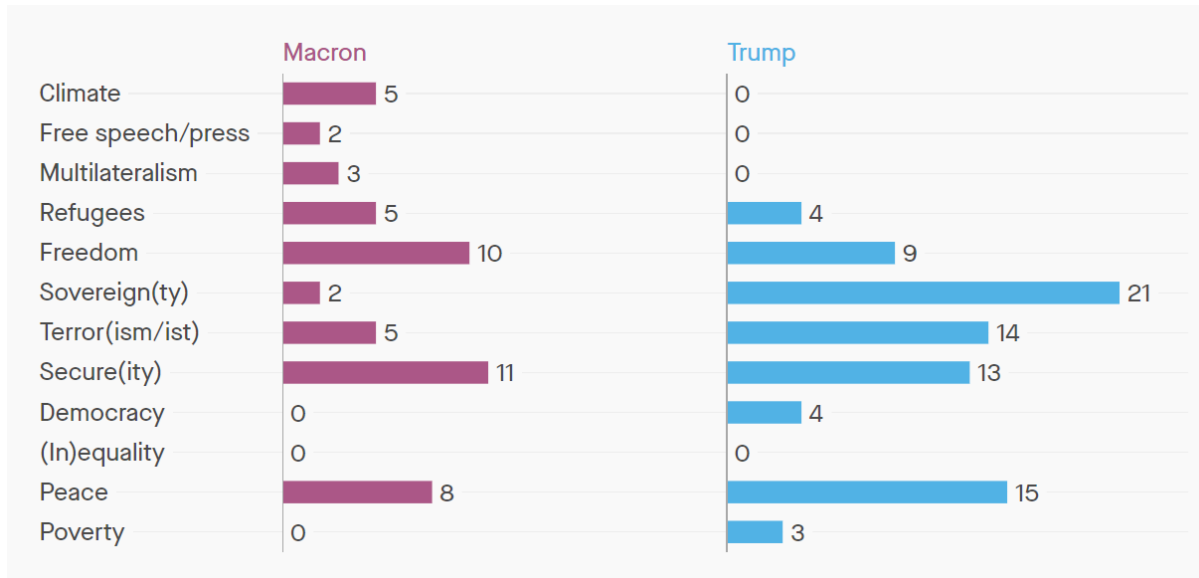
Multilateralism is one of the main features of the policies of the United States and France. The largest international organisation at which both countries undertake multilateral cooperation is the United Nations. The UN was established in New York on 24th October 1945 as a successor to the League of Nations. From the beginning, the US and France had to work closely together as permanent members of the UN Security Council. With such a small number of members, it should be an honour for France. Although the UN has a wide range of activities, one of its targets is to ensure world peace. The UN is doing this through peacekeeping missions. The US and France have worked closely together on many peacekeeping missions. The cooperation started as early as the first United Nations peacekeeping mission - the UNTSO (the purpose of this mission was to observe the Israeli-Arab conflict).

When it comes to the impact of United Nations activity on policy between the Élysée Palace and the White House, undoubtedly, most thoughts are directed towards 2003. That year saw one of the most significant tensions in Franco-American relations, linked to the American intervention in Iraq. A military intervention started without the approval of the UN Security Council is illegal from the point of view of international law. It was France that used its right of veto at this time. French felt that there was not enough reason to intervene and that Saddam Hussein did not own nuclear weapons. Of course, the lack of legitimacy did not prevent the US and Britain from going to war in Iraq. There has been a wave of criticism directed at the United Nations. The George Bush administration, as well as the press and television, in their attack on the UN, formulated theses about its 'death' or 'end' of the organisation (Symonides, 2004).

During Trump's time in office, Emmanuel Macron strongly opposed a policy of pressure on the UN. The US has boycotted the work of some of its agencies. Donald Trump's reaction to the work of the WHO and the withdrawal of the US from this UN agency is a case in point. At the same time, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, Macron noted the negative consequences of China's pressure on the work of the WHO. French demands connected to the UN are more about reform, such as the suspension of veto rights in the Security Council for China. Indeed, after the Russian aggression against Ukraine, the UN cannot do anything. The existing veto right and the membership of Russia and China on the Security Council prevent any action, including such a simple thing as condemning Russian aggression (Maślanka, 2022).

At the beginning of his presidency, Emmanuel Macron, like his predecessors, had the opportunity to give a speech at the UN General Assembly in September. Donald Trump also gave a speech at the same meeting. The completely opposite visions of the modern world presented by these two heads of state were immediately noticed. It can be seen that the presidents used completely different words in their speeches and, consequently, presented utterly different visions of the future of the United Nations. Donald Trump used the word 'sovereignty' as many as twenty-one times, which fits with the nationalist 'America First' doctrine he has created. In contrast, Emmanuel Macron mentioned security, freedom, and peace the most times. However, it is worth noting the slogans used by Macron, which were not mentioned once in Donald Trump's speech. It was the climate, freedom of speech, and multilateralism (Chart 1). Here one can see the divergence between Macron's liberal vision of the functioning of the UN and Trump's emphasis on sovereignty and little integration.

Chart 1. Words using by Trump's and Macron's speeches during the UN General Assembly in 2017



Source: de Haldevang (2017).

The situation has changed somewhat with the start of Joe Biden's presidency on 20th January 2021. In his first speech at the UN, Biden presented a much more Macron-like vision. He marked the importance of democracy and the need for multilateral cooperation to combat global problems. He referred to the need to combat climate change, as well as to respect human rights (BBC, 2021). It was seen that France and the US were more attentive to soft power elements and other types of security than military ones.

French-US cooperation has been going well in terms of action at the UN after the Russian aggression against Ukraine. Both President Macron and Joe Biden did not share Jarosław Kaczyński's enthusiasm for the organisation of a UN peacekeeping mission in Ukraine. The US and France both voted in the same way on a UN Security Council resolution to condemn the invasion of Ukraine (the resolution was vetoed by Russia) and also voted in favour of a UN General Assembly resolution calling on Russia to leave Ukraine.

Predictions

French foreign policy was difficult to predict in April 2022 when it was unknown whether Marine Le Pen or Emmanuel Macron would sit in the Élysée Palace. It was clear that the Nationalist chairwoman would not be willing to work so closely with Democrat Joe Biden. Today we know that Emmanuel Macron will be President for the next five years. However, so much has happened in the past two years that it is impossible to predict indisputably what Macron's policy toward Biden will be. As long as the war in Ukraine continues, the essential aspect of Franco-American relations will be security and, therefore, cooperation in NATO. However, other areas can be identified where collaboration between the White House and the Elysée Palace is likely to develop. First and foremost, attention should be paid to climate change and environmental protection. Another important issue for both presidents is democracy and the protection of human rights. This could be interesting from the point of view of countries such as Poland or Hungary, which are accused of violating the principles of a democratic state. However, the most important thing in Franco-American relations seems to be maintaining common relations among Western countries to effectively counter potential threats such as Russia, an increasingly visible China, terrorism (there is currently a decline in terrorist incidents in Europe, but it is unclear what the trend will be in the future) or new challenges in the future.

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