France “en marche”: Emmanuel Macron and the French Foreign Policy

Bruno Luiz de Souza Ronchi¹ and Diego Luís Bortoli ²

• The rise of Emmanuel Macron in France occurred in a context of anti-establishment sentiment and crisis of the European integration.

• Macron’s foreign policy presents a discourse based on the Gaullo-Mitterrandist tradition. For its pragmatism, his government’s diplomacy may also be ambiguous.

• The current global situation and France’s privileged position in the international order make it possible for the country to increase its influence in the International System.

Presentation

The importance of France for international, and especially European, politics is unquestionable. The country is the largest in Western Europe, has the second largest GDP in the Eurozone and the third largest population of the European Union (EU), after Germany and the United Kingdom. After the completion of Brexit, it will be the only EU country to have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, the sole holder of nuclear weapons and the largest military power in the EU. Given this importance, it is necessary to consider that the course of French policy can have a strong impact on the future of Europe and international politics.

The election of Emmanuel Macron, the new French president, on May 8, 2017, as well as the results of the parliamentary elections in June of the same year are key elements in understanding the country’s politics today. Casanova (2017, 247) points out that the election of the new president represents “an economic, political and European turn” and that Macron’s victory is “a victory for the European party which has just compensated for the defeat of the Constitutional Treaty in the referendum of May 2005, just as the Treaty of Rome in 1957 made up for the failure of the European Defense Community in 1954”. According to the author, the consolidation of the euro and the progressive unification of Europe – as advocated by Macron – are indispensable elements for the recovery of the French economy and its harmonization with the German economy, “a task inaugurated by De Gaulle, persecuted by Georges Pompidou, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing and François Mitterrand”.

Macron’s victory in the 2017 presidential elections

Macron’s rise is marked internally by the weakening of the political arrangement made up of the Parti socialiste and Les Républicains, reproducing the alternation between left and right governments that marks the French Republic³. According to Wormser (2017), the election of the

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¹ Undergraduate student in International Relations at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS). Contact: bruno.ronchi@ufrgs.br
² Undergraduate student in International Relations at UFRGS. Research Assistant at the Brazilian Centre for Strategy & International Relations (NERINT). Assistant Editor of AUSTRAL: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations. Contact: diegolbortoli@gmail.com
³ According to Wormser (2017), the election of the
new president represents an occasion for the revision of the social pact in the wake of ten years of weak economic growth, with no improvement in unemployment or public debt rates. Such a scenario was compounded by reports of illicit payments to Penelope Fillon, wife of the Republican candidate, and by the division of the Socialists from the election of Benoît Hamon as a candidate in the primaries of the party. Ernenwein (2017, 4) states that Macron’s victory “was built against an outgoing president who will leave almost no regrets, and both a parliamentary right and left divided, marked by their mediocre swings and their resignations.” According to the author, “a barrier was raised in the face of the bitter remedy proposed by François Fillon and the wasteful audacities of Benoît Hamon, barely assumed by his camp.”

The loss of confidence in traditional parties was catalyzed by the growth of new or less expressive parties until then, such as Marine Le Pen’s Front National (far right), Emmanuel Macron’s En Marche! (center) and Jean-Luc Mélenchon’s La France Insoumise (far left), with the first two leading to the second round of the elections with more than 45% of the valid votes. According to Fourquet (2017, 269), “Le Pen and Macron pursued a common interest: to replace the traditional left/right confrontation with a new division that the En Marche leader calls ‘progressives versus conservatives’ and that frontist terminology calls ‘the confrontation between globalists and patriots’”. The author claims that the second round of the French presidential election would have been a new field of electoral confrontation between the front row kids and the back row kids of globalization, “after the Austrian presidential election, the British referendum and the US presidential election” (Fourquet 2017, 269). Ernenwein (2017) adds that France didn’t follow Le Pen’s path, but points out that the far-right candidate has taken the Front National and its project to unimaginable levels, and its ten and a half million votes will weigh in the French political debate.

Faced with this scenario, Macron appears as a moderate alternative to the worn arrangement formed by Parti Socialiste and Les Républicains. According to Haddad (2017), Macron managed to capture some anti-establishment rage that condemned the traditional politicians in France and the United States, going against the economic failures of the two main parties and advocating labor market reform and the fight against unemployment. In a way, paradoxically, Fenby (2017) points out that Macron represents a reformist establishment, while at the same time, during the campaign, it represented a considerably disruptive alternative for the country. In addition, the ability to capture the center of the political spectrum, widened by the radicalization of the left and the right, would have been an important element in Macron’s victory. According to Wormser (2017, 8), “being able to capture the center led to Nicolas Sarkozy’s success in 2007 and Francois Hollande’s success in 2012,” as did Macron by “presenting himself outside the parties without disdaining the institutions.”

Sociologically based, according to Schoettl (2017, 273), on “a France well adapted to the new economic order, at ease with new technologies, traveling, mobile, speaking foreign languages, well-to-do, urban, educated, optimistic: France of the winners of globalization”, Macron represents both a disruptive and ambitious project. Among its priorities are “education, internal and external security, labor market reform, energy and technology transition, Europe, the renewal of democracy” (Goulard 2017, 32). According to Wormser (2017), Macron brings together voters who believe in the functionality of institutions from a pro-“Europe-for-protection” orientation, breaking with the elitist
rhetoric that has accompanied political discourse on Europe since the adoption of the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, and addressing a population that understands the direction of globalization and the potential of France in this context.

Once consolidated Macron’s victory in the elections, some practical issues about his first months are presented, the most urgent being to reconcile a geographically and demographically divided country, according to the distribution of votes. According to Ernenwein (2017), the president’s victory is broad but fragile: in the first round, one in four voters voted in Macron, and only one in six eligible French voters chose him; in the second, one in four French abstained and 12% of voters voted white or void. Despite this, the victory of his party - renamed La République en Marche (LEM) in the parliamentary elections in June 2018 - reinforces the start of the new president’s term. With the allied Mouvement Démocrate (Modem), Macron has the support of 361 members of parliament (out of a total of 577). With 126 deputies, the party Les Républicains should be the main opposition force, moving farther to the right to distance itself from what it regards as a center-left government (Le Corre 2017). On a smaller scale, Macron is expected to find a diluted opposition between the 46 deputies of Parti Socialiste, 16 of La France Insoumise, 10 of Parti Communiste Français, 8 of the Front National and 10 independents - remnants of the old French political system. According to Le Corre (2017), many of LEM’s newly elected parliamentarians come from civil society, yet to discover the world of politics and the limitations of legislative power in a country where the executive is predominant. In addition, the government framework will be composed of a well-balanced team of ministers coming from different parts of the political spectrum and an experienced and highly motivated staff, most of whom coming from the top universities and colleges in the country. According to the author, LEM deputies should quickly adjust to a large majority that needs to act without delay.

Foreign policy in the first months of government

Externally, Emmanuel Macron’s rise came in an environment marked by a new conservative wave, China’s emergence as a global power pole, the threat of terrorism, and the continuation of conflicts in the Middle East and Africa. In the United States, the election of Donald Trump and his isolationism brought uncertainty about the traditional alliance between the democracies of the North Atlantic. Trump’s disengagement on several international issues drives other world powers, including France, to take the lead in global governance. In the European Union, the exit of the United Kingdom, the economic and migratory crises and popular discredit in the integration process make many bet their chips in France as a new center of gravity and resistance of the bloc. China, in turn, with its thriving economy and initiatives like the new Silk Road, becomes a key player in the geopolitical and economic considerations of European leaders. Threats to security, finally, complete the conjuncture. If terrorism internally plagued France between 2015 and 2017, Syria and Libya agonize in civil conflicts that reached international proportions, the Kremlin displays controversial diplomacy with the annexation of the Crimea and support for Assad in Damascus, political instability and violence are spreading through the Middle East and the Sahel and outbreaks of tension arise in Asia (Charillon 2017).

Because of his small political experience when compared to other French leaders, Emmanuel Macron is also a newcomer to foreign affairs. Despite this, the new president stated in his program
of government that the international relations of France under his government will prevail by the pragmatism and the inheritance of Charles De Gaulle and François Mitterrand’s diplomacy, which consolidated the realistic “gaullo-mitterrandista” tradition of French foreign policy (En Marche 2017). Following this tradition, Macron takes a discourse of attention to security and defense of national interests, to the detriment of the idealism typical of the French center-left, focused on global governance and development assistance (Rapnouil and Shapiro 2017). In the program, the President acknowledges that France has lost influence on the international scene and stresses his desire to restore and renew the French position as a global power.

Much owing to the short time since Macron’s election, the guidelines that can be inferred from his foreign policy are still less concrete and more rhetorical. Rapnouil and Shapiro (2017) point out three axial features of the new government’s diplomatic discourse: openness, independence and ambiguity. Macron sees France as a nation with a global vocation that must be open to an ever-changing world and to extract opportunities. For this, the country must preserve the independence that marks its foreign policy, guaranteeing its own interests and not subjugating to the interests and decisions of others. This does not mean, however, to isolate itself: cooperation, especially within the framework of the European Union, is fundamental to guarantee French sovereignty. The ambiguity results from the choice of realism and manifested itself in Macron’s silence in his campaign on contradictory issues such as Donald Trump’s presidency, relations with Russia and China, and the challenge of terrorism.

Macron’s unfamiliarity with foreign affairs means that the new Chancellor of France must play a decisive role in the implementation of the country’s foreign policy. At the highest post of the Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères (the MEAE), Macron appointed Jean-Yves Le Drian. The concern with national security is evident in this statement: Le Drian was defense minister during the five years of François Hollande’s government. The 69-year-old politician, who enjoys wide respect in French military circles and led the military intervention against al-Qaeda in the Sahel, is the only member of the Socialist Party in the new cabinet, which shows the intent of a certain continuity in the foreign policy regarding the African continent (Haddad 2017). Among the goals set by Le Drian, in the head of the MEAE, are the promotion of trade, with a view to reducing the country’s trade deficit, implementing the Paris climate regime and strengthening European integration (Ministère de l’Europe et des Affaires étrangères 2017).

The theme of European integration has already occupied and should occupy much of the Macron’s foreign policy. The President has repeatedly argued that the pursuit of French global aspirations, whether in the fight against terrorism or commercial competition with China, is only possible through partnership with members of the European Union (En Marche 2017). Macron also said that Brexit was clear evidence that the Union needs reforms. In an interview at the end of June, he said he believed that the ultraliberal conception under which the bloc was built was responsible for its crisis: the free movement of labor and the resulting low wages contributed to Eastern European countries seeing Europe as a mere “supermarket”, while the lower middle classes of Western Europe, victims of unemployment, lost confidence in the process of integration (Le Figaro 2017). Macron’s France, in this context, has sought to renew its credibility and economic viability so that it can take leadership and lead changes in the most varied agendas of
the European Union: governance of the Euro Zone, convergence in social and fiscal policies, revision of the refugees and asylum policies, and even the resurgence of the bloc’s defense system, which now has the recently launched European Defense Fund (Darnis 2017).

To that end, Macron’s strategy counts on the engine of Franco-German alliance: he insists on closer ties between Paris and Berlin, to which Merkel has responded with enthusiasm. So far, the two governments have already announced several initiatives for fiscal convergence and cooperation in the areas of defense, investment and education, in the framework of the reform of the European Union (Politico 2017). It is in the wake of this strategy that Macron insists on the need to reform the country’s labor laws, one of the main and first fields of confrontation of the newly elected president - to increase French credibility according to the current criteria of the euro zone, respecting the commitment that the public deficit should not exceed 3% of GDP (Mens 2017). According to Ross (2017), the reform of the Code du travail would be a way of trying to soften Berlin’s exaggerated devotion to austerity, as well as its opposition to a more federative euro governance - with a budget, a minister and a parliament - and new forms of financial solidarity in Europe.

Macron’s European vision is crystallized by a federative and democratic conception, which proposes to create a common guideline for the management of public goods, administered by a responsible minister to the European Parliament. The new president “wants to persuade Germany to use its fiscal margins to benefit Europe in order to reduce its huge balance of payments surpluses” and “reopen the debate on reciprocal support for public sector financial liabilities in the Eurozone” (Ibarra 2017, 16). Overall, the intention is to improve tax coordination and protection of the European market in the face of the buy american policy and Asian growth in international trade. Regarding the migration policy, Molénat (2017) states that Macron’s vision is European, but “essentially repressive, with the reinforcement of police forces at European borders (5000 men) and global agreements with countries of origin, combining development and installation of control points to fight against smugglers.”

As for the other side of the Channel, Macron promised to reinforce a pragmatic relationship with a post-Brexit UK. For the French president, the destinies of the two countries are linked, which is why he wants to work together with the government of Theresa May on issues such as defense and counterterrorism, as well as synchronization in refugee and asylum policies. Macron further stated that the Brexit negotiations should be perfectly coordinated within the European Union, assuming that any kind of bilateral discussion on the subject could be detrimental to European interests (Le Figaro 2017).

The same pragmatism that governs relations with a post-Brexit United Kingdom should guide France’s relations with Donald Trump’s government. Paris and Washington have many differences. Macron evokes French independence and European resistance to the United States. Using Gaullist rhetoric, he criticizes Atlanticism - automatic alignment with NATO and Washington - of those who expect the solution to their problems comes from across the Atlantic (Rapnouil and Shapiro 2017). Trump, on the other hand, expressed discreet support to Marine Le Pen in the elections and, in June, announced the withdrawal of his country from the climatic agreements of Paris. The two governments, however, agree on the priority of combating terrorism and the Islamic State. The
Elysee Palace has pledged to coordinate with the White House in retaliation for possible further chemical attacks on Syria. On July 14, during Trump’s pompous visit to Paris, Macron suggested the creation of a contact group on the Syrian conflict, which would involve the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, regional powers and representatives of the conflicting parties. The occasion recalled the centrality of the alliance with Washington to Paris and is indicative that Macron is trying to persuade the US president to revise his decision to withdraw the Paris accords. The French leader has recently stated that it is not possible to engage effectively with terrorism without engaging with the climate issue (Le Monde 2017).

The traditional partnership with Western allies in the maintenance of world peace and security is maintained by Emmanuel Macron, although it presents shades typical of the Gaullo-Mitterrandist tradition. The French president promised to put an end to a form of neoconservatism that France has been importing for ten years: “democracy is not built from without, without the participation of the people.” For him, France agreed not to intervene in Iraq, but was wrong to intervene in Libya; In both cases, regime change through the use of force produced failed states where terrorist groups thrived (Le Figaro 2017). Along these lines, he proposes that his country’s diplomacy be less interventionist and more focused on national security. According to Haddad (2017), Macron does not want to question France’s commitment to NATO, but will increasingly encourage coordination among EU members in intelligence, border control and the fight against terrorism. To achieve its security objectives, Macron plans to raise the defense budget from the current 1.78% of GDP to 2% by 2025 - according to NATO rules (Mens 2017). Its immediate goal is to “weaken jihadist militants who threaten France” and “embark on diplomatic initiatives that bring concrete results to the country” (Irish 2017). The case of Syria is emblematic in this respect. Macron reaffirmed the existence of so-called “red lines” in the country, and said that France is ready to act, even alone, against the use of chemical weapons and disregard for humanitarian corridors. Contrary to François Hollande, however, Macedonian diplomacy understands that the deposition of Bashar al-Assad is not a requirement for the settlement of the conflict in Syria. It depends on the United Nations-supported political dialogue (Le Figaro 2017).

The new French position regarding Assad’s regime converges somewhat with that of Vladimir Putin. Chancellor Le Drian admitted there was no military solution to the conflict, and that points of convergence in French and Russian diplomacy open a “window of opportunity” for the crisis in Syria (Le Monde 2017). After a phase of tensions between Hollande and the Kremlin on issues such as, beyond Syria, Iran and Ukraine, Macron has shown his desire to renew peaceful dialogue with Moscow - the sumptuous reception of Putin at the Palace of Versailles in May, is proof of that. After all, the President sees Russia as a long-term partner, not a direct threat to Europe (Le Figaro 2017).

Macron’s pragmatism in concentrating his diplomatic corps on areas that can bring concrete returns to France focuses especially on the African continent. Africa has little added value to US interests and is therefore a conducive environment for maneuvers for French diplomacy, which sees stability in the Sahel region as one of its priorities. As a defense minister, Le Drian led operations against Islamist militants in Mali and Libya and has tightened relations with key heads of state such as Egypt’s President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Chad’s Idriss Deby. The appointment of the former minister to the Chancellery suggests for many the continuity
of French military intervention on the continent in recent years. On a trip to Mali, the first outside the European Union, Macron offered support to the French troops engaged in counterterrorism operations in the Sahara. At the same time, he renewed the G5 Sahel, a five-country initiative to combat terrorism and smuggling in the Sahel region, offering French and European support to the group (Darnis 2017). Macron, however, attached to the discourse of the end of neoconservatism, intends to bring peaceful solutions to disputes on the continent. In Libya, France has outlined plans for the consolidation of peace between rival factions, calling for the formation of a united national army (L’Express 2017). The French left has reacted skeptically to Macron’s policy towards Africa, identifying contradictions between his discourse of abandonment of interventionism and the continuation of a robust diplomacy towards the continent (L’Humanité 2017).

Concerns about the Asia-Pacific region were, finally, outlined only tangentially by Macron’s government program. For the president, Asia’s growth in economic and military terms and the emergence of new players in the region have undermined the role of North Atlantic democracies in the international board (En Marche 2017). Trade interests - especially the sale of defense equipment - and security - the country has territorial possessions in the Indian and Pacific - hold France to the Asian continent. Until 2016, Hollande government has developed extensive cooperation in defense, peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance with Japan, China, India, Australia and other Southeast Asian countries. In June last year, France assumed the intention of coordinating European Union fleets in the South China Sea to guarantee the right to free shipping, in a scenario of increasing tensions in the region (Rocher 2017). With Macron, however, this attitude must change. Niquet (2017) suggests that, for budgetary and defense reasons, the new president’s diplomacy will move away from the Asian continent and will reorient itself to traditional French interests: Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The French president also intends to make the European Union more robust and competitive in relation to the emerging Asian economies, especially China. At the G20 summit in early July, Macron met for the first time with Chinese President Xi Jinping. In their conversation, the two heads of state confined themselves to expressing their mutual commitment to the Paris climate regime (Les Echos 2017).

France’s pathway in international politics

Despite being relatively young and unfamiliar with international politics, Macron goes, to some extent, against the expectations of continuity in French foreign policy. The new president begins to realign the country’s diplomacy, placing national security at the center of the agenda as he aligns with the US in fighting against terrorism and seeks to improve the French position before Russia, which he regards as a long-time partner, but whose actions in the international political arena require some caution (Irish 2017, Mens 2017). During an interview in late June 2017, Macron stated that “we must rediscover the coherence and strength of an international politics that shall believe in us again” (Le Figaro 2017). According to Irish (2017), the focus of France under Macron seems to be directed to areas to which the US gives less importance, such as Africa or climate change, on which the two countries diverge.

As the United States and the United Kingdom opted for isolation, a window of opportunity opened to France to intensify its global projection. Macron was able to identify this opportunism and has made use of it, using a Gaullo-Mitterrandist rhetoric of French
autonomy in international relations. Although the diplomacy of the new president addresses itself as pragmatic, it is not entirely realistic. Macron’s international speeches and first initiatives point to an adaptation of realism to a globalized scenario in which interdependence is a condition and international cooperation is a necessary instrument for achieving goals. The president’s pro-Europe discourse, “France forte dans une Europe forte”, emphasizes this adaptation, conveying the message that the French method of international insertion is based on the multilateralism of the European Union. In a way, this method resolves and synthesizes a classic dilemma of French foreign policy: pragmatism versus idealism (Darnis 2017).

France occupies a privileged position in the current global order, being the sole EU member (after Brexit) to have a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, whose legitimacy is increasingly challenged. Delphine Allès (2017) suggests that Macron has in his hands the possibility of reinventing France’s autonomous diplomacy by creating new interdependencies and redefining the international system and its institutions of governance. This task requires that French foreign policy move out of its comfort zone, from a mere “event management” diplomacy to actually influencing the structure of the system. Strengthening partnership with emerging countries and the global South and dedicating to the reform of the Security Council seems to be a good strategy for this purpose (Allès 2017).

In any case, it is undeniable that Macron’s election brought greater international visibility to France. Indeed, his government’s call for compliance with the Paris climate agreements, as well as the use of a speech that links the country to the democratic and human rights tradition, European integration, and the reception of refugees has increased French soft power (The Guardian 2017). Coined by Joseph Nye (2004), the term refers to a country’s ability to forge international alliances and shape agent preferences based on the appeal and attraction of its political, economic, and cultural factors. Trump’s controversial election in the United States and the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union have decreased the soft power of these two countries over the past year, while the rise of Macron has improved the perception that the international society has of France.

**Final considerations**

Emmanuel Macron’s election as French president brought comfort in a scenario of return to conservatism – personified, worldwide, in the figure of the U.S. president Donald Trump and, nationally, of the far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. A newcomer to the political career, Macron built his campaign on the ideas of economic reform, free trade and European integration. His election to the Elysée Palace and his European enthusiasm filled the power vacuum left by the United Kingdom and its withdrawal from the bloc.

In foreign policy, Macron embraces a discourse based on pragmatism and the return to the Gaullo-Mitterrandist tradition that seeks to restore the French image as an independent, humanist and European power. Despite the short time since the inauguration of the new president, his initiatives, so far, meet these guidelines. By tightening his relations with Germany, Macron seeks to make the European Union a more robust bloc, as well as a multiplier of French power. With Mr. Trump’s United States, he maintains a pragmatic alliance, converging on issues such as terrorism, but diverging on climate issues. In Africa, the French leader is pursuing anti-terrorism military operations. For being pragmatic, however, Macron’s diplomacy
appear to have certain ambiguities, which can be resolved over the five years of his term. While defending the abandonment of neoconservatism and Atlanticism, Macron, in practice, continues to intervene in African affairs and is committed to Washington on the conflict in Syria. Despite the growing relevance of the Asian continent in international politics, little has been said about the region. And although he speaks of the partnership between Paris and Moscow in good terms, the president is still cautious in his relations with the Kremlin.

If Macron truly wants to give a realistic tone to his foreign policy, he must, first of all, develop a holistic interpretation of the world reality, which calls for the recognition of China and the Asia-Pacific as a new center of power in international relations. It also demands taking advantage of France’s international status and of the window of opportunity that the United States’ disengagement from international affairs may bring. Finally, it requires France to adjust the status quo in order to render its diplomacy more influential.
Notes

3 Inaugurated by Charles de Gaulle in 1958, through the Constitution of October 4, the Fifth Republic breaks with the existing parliamentarianism during the Fourth Republic (1946-1958) and reinforces the role of executive power. De Gaulle is the first president of the Fifth Republic, from 1959 to 1969.

4 In the first round of the elections (04/23/2017), Macron won 24.01% of the valid votes and Le Pen 21.30%.

5 The terms front row kids and back row kids were given a new meaning by Chris Arnade, a Guardian columnist during the US election, to outline the difference between Hillary’s (globalization winners) and Trump’s (globalization losers) voters.

6 In France, voting is not compulsory and is guaranteed to French citizens over the age of 18.

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