



IAI

Istituto Affari Internazionali

Macron's Foreign Policy: Not a Zero Sum Game

by Jean Pierre Darnis

"La France est de retour". This is how French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe commented the results of the June elections when *La République en Marche!*, the new party founded by Emmanuel Macron, swept into power. There are two things to note about this concept of "France is back".

The first is internal. The new president and his majority represent a disruption compared to the previous two presidencies, which were generally perceived as suffering from paralysis. There is therefore a window of opportunity to launch a renewed and reformist season comparable only to the ones experienced by France following moments of deep crisis, as was the case in the aftermath of World War I or the Algerian crisis. It translates into the concept of an "eclipse moment", a time in French history when the nation is re-established in its prerogatives. Paradoxically, this positive reading of the Macron Presidency reverses the so-

called "declinist" theory, which fuelled the rise of populism in France and argued that modernity was endangering the nation and that nationalist policies were needed in order to restore and revive the "real" France.

The second consideration regards France's international role, which is also touched upon by this new "France is back" framework. Clearly, Macron has expressed a strong commitment towards Europe, describing it as a necessary dimension for internal reformism in France. Macron's pro-European stance can be summarized as the idea that Europe represents a needed, and often the only, political dimension where worldwide and multilateral issues can be addressed.

In the past, President Jacques Chirac had declared his desire for a "Europe-power", a typical way to project and multiply French power and influence at a European and international level,

Jean Pierre Darnis is Head of the Security, Defence and Space Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

with Europe being largely conceived as a "super France". Macron's approach shares this vision of a "great nation", but also introduces a more modern and technocratic-based level of multilateral management. Macron will therefore start his presidency with a clear strategic roadmap in Europe: he aims for internal labour market reforms in order to prove Germany and Northern Europe wrong in their traditional criticism of what they see as France's bloated public spending. By the end of September, Macron aims to achieve this very symbolic reform in order to launch a strong cooperation framework with the new German government.

Several ministers and key members of cabinet in Macron's government are fluent in German, an interesting detail which illustrates this willingness to re-start the Franco-German engine. Certainly, relations with Germany have become a priority, a triggering factor that could modify the entire European landscape. Macron needs to prove the economic viability of France in order to obtain flexibility on other key topics such as Eurozone governance and social and fiscal convergence at the EU level. This method could also spread to other items on the European agenda. During his first European Council meeting, Macron immediately started to play this activist role, opportunistically claiming success for the launch of a European Defence Fund. However, he also found himself in a tense meeting with the "Visegrad Group" countries which seemed reluctant to reform the European intra-community directive governing the free movement of workers within the EU, a critical issue raised during the

presidential campaign in France.

This mix of French interest and multilateralism can also be observed on the international scene. A strong symbol is Macron's first trip outside the EU to Gao in Mali, where he went to cheer and offer support to French troops busy with their anti-terror operations in the Sahara region. When it comes to France's Africa policy, there is a strong continuity with his predecessors, but Macron has also re-launched the G5 Sahel, a five-country initiative to reinforce counter terrorism and anti-smuggling operations in the Sahel region. Approved by the UN Security Council, the G5 Sahel could serve as a good tool to get support for French policies from other actors, including the European Union. This initiative offers a good view of Macron's method: stability of the Sahel is a French priority but France also feels this burden should be shared with other EU partners, particularly as risk assessments from the EU's southern flank have largely converged.

Hollande had repeatedly asked the EU for help on these issues, with scarce results. Macron is instead trying a different method, pushing for the creation of a regional and international framework where France emerges as the main facilitator but not as the only member. This approach is indeed very compatible with the UN and the EU, and both are directly involved in terms of providing capabilities and funding for the initiative. In this context, Macron has taken a step back in terms of French ownership, but in doing so has enhanced the international appeal of the security framework France is

promoting. Even if the operation is still in its early stages, this manoeuvre illustrates a change of paradigm in terms of France's traditional approach to foreign policy. The goal remains the same, embedded in a strong feeling about France's international mission and will to act as a relevant global power, but the method is evolving. A shift in method is not a mere detail.

France has often been criticized for its nationalistic and at times unilateral approach to foreign policy. Since the "Arab Spring", France has often pushed for regime change, which in turn has led some analysts to speak of a "neo-con" foreign policy. What we observe under Macron is an interesting mix of pragmatism (defence of French interests) and a methodology that is more compatible with Europe. A more "EU oriented" approach, even in key areas of French interest such as Africa, could lead to more efficient policies that in turn would increase French power and influence. The EU could serve as a "power multiplier" for France, a paradoxical but interesting scenario that represents a shift away from a zero sum approach to foreign policy and openness to entertain unilateral measures.

This EU/multilateral approach might resolve the classic French dilemma of a foreign policy suspended between pragmatism and idealism, between a realist-based approach and the classic French world-shaping vision that is deeply rooted in the will to export the ideals of the French revolution and human rights across the globe. These French policy tensions are not disappearing. Rather, they are melding

with the EU's multilateral approach, which can potentially help resolve the dilemma. Macron is the architect of this evolution. Taking advantage of an unstable international setting where Brexit and Donald Trump's election are creating entropy, Macron is seizing what is also perceived as a window of opportunity, both for a stronger Europe and for a stronger France within Europe.

So, is France back? If "back" refers to the past, not really. Macron is breaking away from the past while not saying so. Though Macron claims to follow a foreign policy based on the "De Gaulle/Mitterrand" classic line, references to France's two leaders seem to be driven by a desire to ensure acceptance and project an image of continuity. Thus the symbolism is preserved. However, Macron is quickly stepping up in his new international role, revisiting all the processes and taking every opportunity to push his foot on the accelerator. This renewed approach opens up a range of possibilities and might define a new track for a France, a country that appears to have suddenly jumped into the 21st century. *Ni plus, ni moins.*

6 July 2017

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

Founded by Altiero Spinelli in 1965, IAI does research in the fields of foreign policy, political economy and international security. A non-profit organisation, the IAI aims to further and disseminate knowledge through research studies, conferences and publications. To that end, it cooperates with other research institutes, universities and foundations in Italy and abroad and is a member of various international networks. More specifically, the main research sectors are: European institutions and policies; Italian foreign policy; trends in the global economy and internationalisation processes in Italy; the Mediterranean and the Middle East; defence economy and policy; and transatlantic relations. The IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), two series of research papers (*Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Papers*) and other papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Working Papers*, etc.).

Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

- 17 | 02 Jean Pierre Darnis, *Macron's Foreign Policy: Not a Zero Sum Game*
- 17 | 01 Bobby McDonagh, *Why Europe Matters More Than Ever*