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**US-French Relations After the  
US Election**

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# US-French Relations After the US Election

**By Martin Quencez | May 22, 2024**

*The outcome of the 2024 US elections will define the options for cooperation and competition in the US-French relationship in the coming years. Besides Ukraine and security matters, the impact of the next US administration's policies on European economic and industrial growth could be a major point of tension between the two countries.* From George Washington's warning about "entangling foreign alliances" to Donald Trump's desire to turn NATO into a transactional protection racket, Americans' interest in foreign affairs and transatlantic relations has been self-interested, especially during election years. Woodrow Wilson campaigned in 1916 on "he kept us out of war". Franklin Roosevelt promised in 1940 that "your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars."

The underlying anti-Americanism that permeates French political culture has somehow worked to the benefit of the transatlantic relationship in recent years. Having limited expectations of your main ally can prove a factor of stability at a time when some Europeans, genuinely stunned by the evolution of US politics, react more emotionally. This was certainly the case after the 2016 election of Donald Trump. In 2024, however, the stakes are even higher for the French-US relationship. The results of the US elections could define the future of the European project and, with it, impact French core interests.

The French foreign policy vision is unlikely to change after 2024. Now more than ever, Europe needs to develop its own political, economic, military, industrial, and technological capabilities to be able to defend its interests in a world of great-power competition. For Macron, France's security and prosperity depend on the success of this effort, and the person in the White House in January 2025 will determine what role the United States will play in it.

In this context, a Trump victory would constitute a more direct shock for Paris in the short term. The prospect of a Biden reelection, while giving Europe more time to step up, also requires a serious effort of preparation.

## **The Trump Scenario**

"Macron, do you know Macron? He is a nice guy...." During a rally in Iowa in January, former President Trump recalled a trade dispute he had with the French president. Contrary to most of his European counterparts, Emmanuel Macron closely interacted with Trump from 2017 to 2021, and he will undoubtedly try to leverage this experience in case of a second mandate.

Macron and Trump's relationship went from apparently friendly to more confrontational and openly mutually insulting. Macron's attempt to influence Trump's position on the most contentious issues—climate, the Iran nuclear deal, NATO, trade—yielded few results, and it is unlikely that a newly elected Trump would prioritize cooperation with the French president after 2025.

In fact, most of the disagreements of the time would be turbo-charged in the case of a second Trump mandate.

The Republican candidate has threatened to "encourage Russia to do whatever they want" to European allies who do not pay enough, and has previously supported the idea of withdrawing from NATO. His

positions on Ukraine also appear to be in opposition to those of France, [as Paris publicly supports Ukraine's accession to NATO](#) as the best way to guarantee the future security and stability of the country.

The general use of tariffs, promised by Trump's former trade representative [Robert Lighthizer](#), constitutes another major issue for France. The effects of a new trade war with the United States, coupled with the growing concern regarding European competitiveness, could further harm France's economic growth at a time when the country's public debt continues to grow.

Finally, the indirect effects on Europe's unity may be the most challenging implications of a Trump victory for the Macron government. The messages of the Republican candidate might serve as a [wake-up call](#) for Europeans on defense, but they will more realistically lead to a general fragmentation of the continent. Faced with the threat of losing US security guarantees, each European ally would be incentivized to find its own deal with the Trump administration. Separate transactions, at the bilateral level, could become very costly for Europe. The alignment of Europe with US China policy would be one of the first conditions of such an agreement with Donald Trump, as would the increased purchase of US industrial and military capabilities. In effect, this would be the "[vassalization of Europe](#)" that Macron has repeatedly warned against.

### **The Biden Scenario**

As in many other European countries, the media in France seem generally obsessed with the prospect of a Trump victory—so much so that the implications of a Biden reelection are barely discussed.

Yet, since 2021, France has often expressed criticism of some of President Biden's decisions and policies. The AUKUS deal, negotiated by the US behind France's back and cancelling a major French industrial agreement with Australia, [outraged](#) the national strategic community, the Inflation Reduction Act was seen as "[unfriendly](#)" and "inconsistent with the rules of the WTO", and disagreements over the Sahel led to bilateral [tensions](#). A second Biden mandate would present new challenges.

On Ukraine, the French and US positions could grow farther apart as the war continues. The costs of the reconstruction of Ukraine, added to those related to the integration of Ukraine into the EU, could become a point of friction if the burden of Ukraine's future security falls entirely on Europe. Similarly, Biden's trade and industrial policies, as well as his reliance on [tariffs](#), could also be an issue for a French president.

The hope in Paris, however, is that a Biden reelection would encourage allies to use the next four years to strengthen Europe's geopolitical role and capacities. Biden will put pressure on Europeans to do more, and his agenda could be an opportunity to work closely with Washington towards this objective while keeping Europe's unity. For a US administration that is committed to the transatlantic alliance, France will remain an important interlocutor in that context, and even a potential European leader on specific security issues.

### **The Unknown Trajectory of French Politics**

The results of the US elections will be the main determinant of the future of the French-US relationship beyond 2024, but the evolution of French politics could also play a surprising role. The political fragility of the current French government and the predicted victory of the far right in the June EU Parliamentary elections could lead to instability in the coming months and years.

In any case, President Macron may decide to play a more disruptive role in the bilateral relationship with the United States before he ends his mandate in 2027, especially if he considers that a Biden reelection leads to European strategic complacency.

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### **About the Author**

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