



Trump's Retreat from Syria Puts the French-U.S. Alliance to the Test

By Alexandra de Hoop Scheffer and Martin Quencez

Turkey's military operation in northern Syria has triggered great concern in France, which perceives the destabilization of the Kurdish-held areas and the liberation of foreign fighters as direct security threats. What is more, the unclear U.S. posture has confused the French government. After President Donald Trump seemed to give carte blanche to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, mixed messages were conveyed from Washington as to what the U.S. military planned to do. The condemnation of Turkey's operation by Congress and eventually by Trump, as well as the adoption of sanctions against Turkey only added to the general confusion.

This is particularly unsettling for France as its military participation in the coalition against Islamic State relies on the United States, and a withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria will directly affect its ability to stay there. The latest developments are also a painful reminder of the French and European inability to act autonomously in this critical neighborhood. This is all the more concerning as Russia's influence in the Levant increases, which gives it leverage on Europe's security and weakens France's position as President Emmanuel Macron aims to revise his country's relationship with Moscow.

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Confused Allies Are Expected to Follow

The contradictory shifts in the Trump administration's policy in just a week follow a now-familiar pattern. France and other U.S. European allies have been confronted with a unilateral decision by the president that is quickly followed by adjustments by his administration and pressure on European countries to align with Washington's course. Last week Defense Secretary Mark Esper assured Defense Minister Florence Parly that the United States' military presence in Syria was not in question and that the U.S. work done as part of the coalition against Islamic State would continue. A few days later, though, he announced that, "at the President's direction, [the Department of Defense] is executing a deliberate withdrawal of US military personnel from [northeast] Syria".



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The United States is now pressuring European governments to take diplomatic and economic measures against Turkey, and uses the threat of extraterritorial sanctions to make them bend. The decision by France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other European countries to halt exports of military equipment to Turkey was precipitated by the risk of being exposed to such sanctions. This reveals the gap between the Trump administration’s understanding of the crisis and that of many European governments, which believe that the United States is to blame for having let Erdoğan order the operation in Syria. It also shows that, as Washington’s political leverage significantly declines in the region to the benefit of Russia, the Trump administration resorts to sanctions as its main foreign policy tool and expects Europeans to follow.

Only Trump and his Electoral Base Matter

France’s minister of foreign affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, said recently that in its relationship with the United States “France has one interlocutor: Trump”. The French position is to disregard the potential nuances and different influences within the U.S. administration, and to consider that the president is the sole real decision-maker on foreign policy. This can be explained by the personal relationship that Macron has built with his U.S. counterpart, but also by the assessment that Trump continues to pursue his America First program, especially with next year’s presidential election approaching.

The latest events confirm France’s working hypothesis. Trump’s willingness to give a green light to the Turkish intervention and to withdraw the 1,000 U.S. troops remaining in northeast Syria have been widely criticized by Republican members of Congress as well as the U.S. strategic community at large. Yet, despite this pushback and the apparent compromise in Washington on the newly voted sanctions against Turkey, the changes in the U.S. military presence on the ground are being implemented.

A Continuous Decoupling of Security Interests

Since the beginning of the Turkish operation, Trump has repeated that Syria is “7,000 miles away” and that the security consequences of the current situation would therefore not affect the United States. A White House communiqué on October 6 also stated that France and Germany refused to take their foreign fighters back, and that the United States would not hold them in Syria for many years. That the threat from developments in Syria to European security is not a priority concern to the administration was further made explicit when Trump stated that foreign fighters were “going to escape to Europe.”

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From a French perspective, however, this is not a radical change in the U.S. position, but rather simply a change of method and rhetoric. The transatlantic decoupling in this matter was already evident in the decision by President Barack Obama not to intervene in Syria. At the time, Obama stated that Syria did not represent a “vital interest” for the United States and therefore did not justify a military action.

The Trump administration is also implementing the U.S. vision of a transatlantic division of labor, essentially driven by geography. In this, the United States' priority is the security of the Persian Gulf and containing China, including militarily, while Africa and the Levant are to be handled by European countries and regional partners. This is about "burden shifting," a more radical version of the burden sharing that has been discussed for years.

Europe's Feeling of Helplessness

When Josep Borrell, the incoming EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy recently said "we don't have magical powers," he summarized the general feeling of helplessness of European countries to respond quickly to the crisis in Syria. The EU has condemned Turkey's operation, and France, Germany, and the United Kingdom have also called for further European coordination. However, it is clear that all this will not fundamentally change Erdoğan's course. It is an important but mostly symbolic step, considering the security issues at stake.

For France, the current political weakness of Germany and the United Kingdom has been an opportunity to assert its leadership in foreign and security policy at the European level, but the Syrian crisis shows the limits of this. Paris needs strong European partners to continue the fight against Islamist terrorist groups in the Levant, especially with the United States withdrawing. A coordinated political response could have sent a positive signal that these three countries are still players to be reckoned with. Instead, France's margin of maneuver is dramatically reduced as it faces alone the implications of the U.S. withdrawal.

The abdication of U.S. leadership in Syria has been a test for European countries since the beginning of the civil war, and recent events confirm that they have failed to step up to the plate. Meanwhile, with Russia's military presence in the country and diplomatic activism in the Astana negotiations, it is becoming clear that the future of Syria will be decided outside the Western camp. In this context, France finds itself compelled not only to re-examine its cooperation with the United States but also to acknowledge the ever-growing influence of Russia in the region. This will be seen as a validation of Macron's call for a rethinking of the Europe's relationship with Russia and for discussing respective interests with it.

Transatlantic Take

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1744 R Street NW
Washington, DC 20009
T 1 202 683 2650 | F 1 202 265 1662 | E info@gmfus.org
<http://www.gmfus.org/>