

Alain Lefebvre

Macron Unveiled

The Prototype for a New Generation of World Leaders

With a preface by Michael Pembroke



GAUDIUM

Introduction

Emmanuel Macron knows that the world of the twenty-first century is changing with unforeseen rapidity. From the start of his presidency, Macron's strategic independence was evident. The first head of state that he invited to France for an official visit was President Putin. And Europe is central to Macron's vision of an effective multilateral world order. In this respect, he exhibits similarities to Charles de Gaulle, who challenged American hegemony within NATO and strived to make France an independent European power. Macron is more diplomatic, more nuanced, and more modern, but like de Gaulle, he aspires to make France an independent, humanist, European power; one that is a global force for good within the limits of its ability and influence, without unrealistic objectives, without overreach, without making the mistake of trying to solve all the world's problems.

The United States' recent ignominious withdrawal from Afghanistan — after 20 years and almost \$3 trillion in expenditure — was a watershed moment in history, one that will not be lost on Emmanuel Macron. The American failure in Afghanistan serves to reinforce the overwhelming lesson of the past 75 years since World War II, that military solutions are rarely if ever a successful long-term answer to political conflicts, even when there is short-term success. The use of military means to make other sovereign regimes, foreign cultures, and different civilizations conform to a particular world view — whether under the guise of spreading democracy or dressed up as nation-

building or masquerading as a force for common good – never was, and never could be justified. Macron knows that too.

Shortly after his election, he took an early and emphatic stand on the U.S.-led offensives against Iraq and Libya, stating that: “Democracy is not built from the outside without the support of the people. France did not participate in the war in Iraq, and it was right. And it was wrong to wage war in this way in Libya.”

Few would now doubt the wisdom of Macron’s position on the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. Democracy may be the most desirable form of government but it cannot be ‘imposed’ from the outside, let alone by military force. And it is not necessarily practicable or appropriate for every country. The variety and diversity of the world’s cultures, political systems, and civilizations defy ready categorization, let alone simplistic ones. Many political systems and forms of government may not meet our approval. Some are positively distasteful; others egregious; a few iniquitous. And many forms of folly and malevolence masquerade as democracies; while many authoritarian regimes are benign and others far less so. There are no simple solutions. Emmanuel Macron understands that.

After decades of American unilateralism culminating with President Trump’s ‘America First’ mantra, France and Germany, guided by President Macron and Chancellor Merkel respectively, have been active in promoting the return of a multilateral world order, based on a framework of international cooperation underpinned by strong and effective institutions, in which Europe plays a key role. In Macron’s vision of a future world order, the best guarantee of global security and prosperity is a multilateral rules-based order, not exclusively a U.S.-led rules based order. For Macron, one consequence of the diminution of the power, prestige, and authority of the United States is the need for a strengthening of international institutions and increased global cooperation. In the new and unfolding world after Afghanistan,

American power and influence will remain significant, although not as pervasive or pre-eminent as it has been, while the European Union, Russia, China, and the United Nations Security Council will also be important cornerstones of a multilateral world order. The European Union, China, and Russia are all working, for example, on ways of challenging the primacy of the U.S. dollar as the world's dominant reserve currency, including, in the cases of China and Russia, on the adoption of new financial instruments and digital currencies.

The recent diplomatic contribution of France in the war-ravaged Middle East, provides another insight into how the future might look when there is a lighter American footprint. As the United States military presence in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria ends or is reduced, diplomacy is returning. The recent Baghdad Conference for Cooperation & Partnership hosted by Iraq – which Macron was instrumental in organizing – was a remarkable historic victory in itself. America was not invited to the table. The conference brought together friends and foes: Iran and its sometime enemy Saudi Arabia; Qatar and its recent adversaries the UAE, Egypt and Kuwait; as well as Turkey and Jordan. All participants agreed to support Iraq in preserving security, reconstruction, and economic reform and stressed the necessity for regional cooperation in dealing with common challenges. King Abdullah of Jordan noted that Iraq was the priority of all participants. The conference – for which Macron can take much credit – was a significant step for Iraq towards a post-American era in the region.

Similarly, European Union diplomacy, especially from France and Germany, has been instrumental in maintaining engagement with Iran – despite Washington's vilification of Iran, the painful provocation caused by the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the nuclear deal, its re-imposition of sanctions, and its assassination of Iranian General Qasem Suleimani. On this issue as well, Macron has placed France at the center of the negotiations. The European efforts are

providing a bridge for U.S.-Iranian re-engagement, which may regrettably still come to nothing given the bitterness of some hardliners in the Iranian regime. But the prospect of normalized economic relations with Europe provides an incentive for Iran to commit to some form of reconstituted deal limiting its nuclear weapons aspirations. France is playing an indispensable role.

In relations with China also, Macron has shown pragmatic leadership in contrast to the binary and often antagonistic approach of the United States. Europe has its disputes with China – currently reflected in subsisting mutual sanctions – but France and Germany in particular are careful to avoid demonizing China. President Macron has warned that ‘ganging up on China’ would be ‘counterproductive’ and that it is necessary to ‘find the right way to engage’. The ratification of the China-E.U. trade treaty is currently on hold but each is the other’s largest trading partner and analysts believe that the agreement will eventually come into force. An economic resolution between China and Europe seems more likely than any resolution with America.

When necessary, Macron is realistic and firm with China. He is not afraid to criticize Beijing but he avoids unnecessary confrontation. His forceful response to the constant clamor for action over the treatment of Uighurs in Xinjiang, was icily direct: “I am not going to start a war with China on this subject.” The Uighur issue is a troubling domestic question, unique to China, that arises inside a sovereign country. Macron knows that there are other ways of attempting to influence China’s behavior. He also knows that it is a mistake to conflate moral issues with strategic concerns; and that human rights abuses and moral objections to them do not provide a legitimate basis for invasion and war.

In the Indo-Pacific, Macron has grand ambitions. France was once a colonial power in the region and Macron clearly aspires to increase its strategic presence there in the future. In fact, France was the first

European Union country to embrace the 'Indo-Pacific' concept in 2018. By 2021, the French Navy's operational activity in the region had become particularly intense. Macron wants France to be a mediating, inclusive, and stabilizing Indo-Pacific power, striking an equilibrium between the importance of balancing against China with the need to avoid an escalatory posture towards Beijing; promoting a stable, law-based, multipolar order in the region, and not one solely focused on America's perceived security interests. France's Indo-Pacific stretches from Djibouti on the Horn of Africa to Polynesia in the South Pacific and covers a larger area than that over which the United States seeks to extend its influence. Through France's extensive territorial presence, its growing naval projection capabilities, and its active diplomatic engagement, Macron seeks to make France a committed regional actor and a moderating force that serves as a bridge to Europe.

Diplomatic engagement is key. In France's relations with the major powers, it seeks balance, not uncritical ideological alignment with anyone. Under Macron, France is a friend and ally of the United States but will not allow itself to be systematically aligned with Washington on all issues regardless of the subject matter. Macron is however on good terms with President Biden and shares much of his outlook. His preference is to deal with all parties rather than to slavishly support one of them. In general, Emmanuel Macron's personal disposition is towards accommodation over confrontation, negotiated solutions to ultimatums, and diplomacy to war. He does not have that cast of mind that defines international reality as basically military and which tends to discount the likelihood of finding a solution except through military means. Yet when the circumstances require it, he has acted, and has shown he will act, firmly. His stated choice is to enforce red lines when they are set, which occurred when France joined the coalition airstrikes directed at Syria's clandestine chemical arsenal.

Emmanuel Macron is nothing if not clear-eyed. Fundamentally, he is a pragmatist — a non-ideological political leader, influenced by the values of the Enlightenment, who eschews a binary approach to international relations. Americans tend to hunger for a simple storyline with heroes and villains. But such thinking — good (us) versus evil (them) — is the antithesis of Macron's way of dealing with foreign states and leaders. He understands better than Washington has historically demonstrated, the need for consensus, the importance of pragmatism and the desirability of being willing to compromise. Macron's language is that of diplomacy and negotiated solutions in preference to military responses. And he adds a certain idealism to his realistic pragmatism, reflecting to some extent the romanticism of Charles de Gaulle, who famously said that France's vocation since 1789 has been "to serve the cause of man, the cause of freedom, the cause of human dignity." It is a refreshing change.

Macron's younger, more modern, more independent, perspective is evident in other ways as well. He has positioned France to be a global champion in the fight against climate change. And he has opened the Palace of Versailles, which has traditionally been used for the most important state visits by the kings, popes, emperors and tsars of yesteryear, to a cavalcade of business leaders from the world's most significant Asian, American, and European companies. The CEOs of Coca-Cola, Netflix, Google, Hyundai, Samsung, Toyota, Cooper Pharma, Rolls Royce, and many others have all been welcomed. Perhaps partly as a result, France was the most attractive European country for investors in both 2019 and 2020.

In the domestic arena, Emmanuel Macron has made no secret of his admiration for the Swedish model as a means of achieving both economic prosperity and social justice. Success has been harder to achieve in practice given the nature of French politics and the disruption caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, but during his presidential

campaign, references to Sweden and the Nordic model were a recurrent theme in Macron's speeches. He was in good company. Franklin Delano Roosevelt often cited Sweden as a model to be admired – “a royal family, a socialist government and a capitalist system all working side by side” in a system that maintains a well-functioning market economy and private ownership while ensuring an equitable redistribution of wealth.

A key feature of the Nordic model is pragmatism, combined with transparency and a certain tough-mindedness. Through his policies and actions, Macron has exhibited similar characteristics. They have helped to contribute to his position as the first French political leader who is independent of the policies and ideologies of both the left and the conservative side of politics. In fact, Macron's pragmatism is his main argument, his most important weapon, and his greatest distinguishing feature. It is a mark of his independence from the entrenched and dogmatic left/right divide in France and it is the reason for his independence – where necessary – from Washington and London in international relations.

Emmanuel Macron is a lesson for the rest of the world. He is a student of philosophy who believes in the importance of pragmatism in dealing with conflicts, especially in international relations. Pragmatism, as a philosophical concept, is the antithesis of an ideological approach to the resolution of conflicts. An ideological approach lies behind the ascendant American attitude to China – advocating that the United States and its allies engage in a great Manichean struggle with China that will define the next century. Former Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, described it as a conflict “between tyranny and freedom.” President Biden sees it as a struggle between authoritarianism and democracy. It should be nothing of the sort. Macron understands that.

After Afghanistan, America's next crisis is China. A pragmatic approach to China involves recognition that the satisfactory resolution

of the disputes and differences with China requires a mutual accommodation that permits all affected parties to coexist in relative peace and prosperity, despite those differences. Conflict with China is not a zero-sum game. Unlike the former Soviet Union, China does not threaten to attack or invade the American homeland. Nor does it seek to export its ideology or system of government – Taiwan being a notable historical exception. Many, perhaps most, differences with China will never be resolved. But there are many areas that are ripe for cooperation between China and the United States, and many areas where their economic and technological competition can only advance the interests of humanity. President Macron’s pragmatism provides a model. If he is re-elected for a further five-year term in 2022, Macron’s friendship and influence might just steer President Biden in the right direction. The world wants accommodation between China and the United States, not confrontation. Macron’s story is fascinating. He is a man of the times.

Michael Pembroke

Author of *America in Retreat* (2021) and
Korea-Where the American Century Began (2018)