

## Geographical Overview | EU's Mediterranean Countries

# For France: Europe, the Mediterranean or Africa?

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Ten years after the Paris Summit and the launch of the Union for the Mediterranean in 2008, does France still intend to play leader in strategic Mediterranean affairs? Can its latest President propose a new path for French foreign policy in this sphere? Should it contribute to rebuilding Euro-Mediterranean relations just as it intends to influence EU construction? What if Africa supplants the Mediterranean on the list of priorities?

### A Polarizing Election

In May 2017, the election of a new President of the Republic in France did not fail to attract international attention. After a campaign full of twists and turns, the second round of the election placed two diametrically different projects for France in opposition. On the one hand, the programme proposed by Marine Le Pen, leader of the Front National since 2011, who positioned herself, unsurprisingly, on the extreme right of the political spectrum by advocating a series of strong nationalist attitudes, and promising the impossible to vulnerable sectors of the population, unfortunately susceptible to such populist discourse. On the other hand, Emmanuel Macron, a perfect stranger to the country until 2014, when he became minister of Economy, Industry and the Digital Sector before leaving the post in the summer of 2016 to found *En Marche!*, his own political movement. He stood out for expressing a centrist political vision for inland politics, removing himself from left-

wing or right-wing partisan logic, and a profoundly European conviction open towards globalization. During the second round of the presidential election, against all odds and progressively capitalizing on the errors or affairs of his competitors, Emmanuel Macron won by a fairly significant lead (66% of the votes cast) over Marine Le Pen on the evening of 7 May 2017. In short, he projected a message of confidence in France's strengths and in world developments, in contrast to his rival's divisive and alarmist discourse.

### A New President, Renewed Expectations

The 25th President in the history of the Republic of France, Emmanuel Macron is, at 39, also the youngest to take up office in the Élysée Palace. Although he unquestionably embodies the generational renewal of the political class awaited by a large percentage of French society, Emmanuel Macron did not generate general enthusiasm during the campaign or in the wake of his election. It is clearly too early to judge his actions at the head of the country, especially since high-stake national issues are not lacking for this President, whose performance will be evaluable at mid-term, that is, at the 2020 horizon. He has promised various reforms during his five-year term and has embarked on a process calling for dialogue and coherence at each stage of his programme. In both form and substance, the French are finally curious to know more about this unprecedented political figure who is Emmanuel Macron. And this share of unknowns already has the merit of regenerating the political debate in France. But it is on the international level that President Emmanuel Macron causes the greatest excitement at this stage. During the electoral campaign, the French

probably did not quite realize what the arrival of this new actor on the political scene could mean abroad. That the Americans could elect Barack Obama in 2008 or the Canadians, Justin Trudeau in 2015 – why not? But that the French, in their “old” country, once revolutionary but turned so conservative, could put such an inexperienced young man in the Presidency of the Republic – what a shock!

Since he took up office, Emmanuel Macron has garnered a great deal of attention from international commentators, and he is well served by a busy diplomatic schedule and the complicity of a quickly-established rapport with numerous world leaders. The smiling, dynamic face of the French President is subconsciously changing perceptions on the state of the country, which many formerly described as paralyzed and in decline. Above all, this French election has brought a breath of fresh air to an international political sequence of events marked over the past few months by the EU crisis and the Brexit vote, the tensing of Russia, the victory of Donald Trump in the US and a certain tendency to reject the rules of multilateralism. In sum, Emmanuel Macron, through his discourse and programme, refutes the scenario of a resurgence of nationalism in world affairs. Will he truly have the means to influence this global trajectory? Beyond the inevitable media frenzy of the first few months, will he simply be a source of attraction abroad? Will he manage to go beyond the stage of promised action by progressively turning the confidence his voters have placed in him into concrete acts?

### Questions for the Mediterranean

All of these questions also concern the Mediterranean Region. As all of his predecessors, the new French President is expected. The Mediterranean is a strategic region for France. This is nothing new and a well-known foreign policy component of this European power. The reasons are historical, socio-cultural, geographic and economic.

France's past often draws it back to this region, which was once the centre of the world. France's demographic composition nurtures multiple human and social ties between it and countries along the Mediterranean seaboard, namely, the countries to the south of France, which itself has a coast along the

Mediterranean. In any case, trade relations are dynamic between the French power and North African countries, but also with those of the Middle East.

How can Macron act differently to former presidents regarding the Mediterranean Region, considering that issues in the region are rapidly changing? What are the opportunities and risks in this area, which Macron knows will be among the relations to maintain and the strong tensions to manage during his term? Shouldn't he first focus on relaunching Europe before attempting to influence the affairs of a much more complex southern neighbourhood?

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The President has always emphasized his attachment to European integration and his will to rebuild the dynamics of trust that allowed the countries of the continent to co-operate in the past. Emmanuel Macron well knows that such a political relaunch of the EU requires in part the efficiency of the France-Germany duo. It was no coincidence that his first trip abroad, on 15 May, the day after he took up office, was to Berlin. To reassure public opinion on the role of the EU and demonstrate that protection of populations is greater on a European-wide scale, according to Macron, concrete actions are needed, made possible by long-term projects. When proceedings and short-termism prevail to the detriment of ideas and strategies, Europe is not being built: it is moving backwards, like a crayfish. The unpredictability of an America headed by Trump has surely given Europe cause to reflect on its strategic autonomy. Any goal of rebuilding necessarily requires new projects. To restart itself, Europe needs to know what direction to go. Emmanuel Macron clearly wishes to contribute to reorienting the slightly rusty European compass.

It is therefore certain that foreign policy priority for France during the Macron Administration will be Eu-

rope, first and foremost. This does not entail indifference towards the Mediterranean Basin, however. On the contrary, in both Paris and Brussels, as well as in numerous capitals on the continent, everyone agrees on the geopolitical importance of this southern neighbourhood. A turbulent Mediterranean area constitutes a major handicap on the road to EU renewal. But the answers lie neither in closing oneself off behind walls, nor in the wishful thinking of a "Mediterranean Union." Ten years after the Paris Summit, which had established its premises, the regional panorama has changed profoundly. Worse, it has deteriorated. Multilateralism in the Mediterranean only works with concrete initiatives adapted to people's real needs or capable of uniting states along the Mediterranean seaboard on issues that have become so complex that only collective responses have any real effect. Such issues include matters of climate, water, food security and infrastructure, not to mention employment, in particular youth employment.

In this regard, the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), based in Barcelona, tenaciously maintains this truly fragile multilateral dynamic. By working more with other international and regional institutions in order to bolster synergies and maximize the impact of the actions implemented, the UfM should remain a major instrument of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. The new French President, adept at speeches seeking to reassure and present things in a more positive light, could perhaps make a case for the UfM becoming a soundbox for good news and innovative projects in the area.

In its Neighbourhood Policy regarding the Mediterranean area, the EU will have to make thematic choices and no longer attempt to deal with everything. Budgetary resources are limited. Moreover, certain issues cannot be considered without taking into account power struggles going far beyond European actors. Regarding the war in Syria, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the handling of instability in the Sahel, the EU, and much less so France, cannot act in isolation. But they should partake of this collective responsibility, consisting of finding solutions to ease the tensions gripping this vast region. This should not, however, lead to blind conformism regarding American or Russian policies. The EU and France, as was the case in the 1990s, presumably have assets to bring to the table to differentiate their

strategy in the area from the other major powers and appear as credible partners to the population of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

### **React or Anticipate?**

This poses the problem of the stance to adopt vis-à-vis this Mediterranean space in constant effervescence. Over the past few years, shaken by the popular revolts in many Arab countries and by terrorist threats, Europe and France have primarily acted in reaction to events. The Libyan episode likewise demonstrated the dangers of an overly spontaneous military intervention without a long-term political project for that country. The result is that French foreign policy towards the Mediterranean Basin is tending more and more towards segmentation of approaches according to country. Pragmatic bilateralism is fully functioning, thus reducing the legibility of a hypothetical French strategy for the Mediterranean.

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Everything would seem to indicate that President Macron, likely with a change in orientation and in his particular style, will continue to carry out French action in a manner adapted to the specific circumstances of each country and thus the reciprocal interests comprising bilateral relations. This will particularly be true for the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). The two major unknowns are ultimately the position he will adopt regarding Turkey, considering the authoritarian excesses taking place in this Middle East giant, and his will to take an active role in Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, if he is indeed invited to participate.

In any case, beyond the bilateral dynamic that will prevail, Emmanuel Macron's France will likely be strongly inclined to propose the development of a post-2020 Euro-Mediterranean agenda focussing on action to be taken during the coming decade on

several specific topics. This calls for greater cohesion in EU positions towards the region and greater synergy between statements and actions. A single example of coherence can be found: maximizing support to countries undergoing reform and progressing in their democratic transitions. Regarding topics, as stated earlier, limited resources require making sound choices and prioritizing matters affecting people's daily lives and geared towards the needs of Mediterranean countries. On the geographic level, it would perhaps be appropriate to consider as well certain advantages often provided by the 5+5 dialogue format in the western Mediterranean, not to mention the matter of synergies with the neighbours of EU neighbours, whether they be the Gulf States or countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. In order to rebuild, Europe should seek progress insofar as stability, growth and respectful dialogue in its Mediterranean neighbourhood. Emmanuel Macron should contribute to lending visibility and means to those who, from civil society to institutions, not to mention companies and scientists, are working towards a positive and open Mediterranean region.

### **Africa at the Heart of Foreign Policy?**

The French President, armed with his pro-European message, can thus likewise bring renewed hope for Mediterranean solidarity. In any case, we should consider the fact that France's extra-European foreign policy has gradually shifted towards Africa. The immense challenges of the African continent certainly demand such a strategic approach by both Europe and France.

Emmanuel Macron is interested in Africa and the possibilities of renewing ties with countries that have been growing more distant in recent years. He observes, as do many, the changes taking place in Africa insofar as trade flows, investments and innovation, convinced of the opportunities offered by

this colossal area with a growing population. Francophone African populations are expected to reach approximately 500 million by 2030. But the French President likewise views the risks threatening development in Africa with concern and undoubtedly some fear. Climate change, exponential growth of shanty towns and the terrorist movements that are prospering in marginal territories are all issues threatening the security of populations. Future migration issues could be immense. In an interview in the newspaper *Le Monde* from 23 April 2017, Emmanuel Macron stated the following: "When I look at Africa, I see the continent of the future [...] This is why I want to establish an ambitious partnership between France, Europe, the Mediterranean region and Africa to foster our mutual interests in the spheres of: climate, trade, employment and innovation, but also security and stability."

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France, as the rest of Europe, is thus looking to "the Africas," with situations as highly contrasting as they are diverse, with so many "possible futures." Is this an opportunity for resituating the Mediterranean in the centre, between a Europe to be rebuilt and an African continent to be developed? Whatever the stakes represented by Sub-Saharan Africa, it would be difficult to "skip" the countries of the southern Mediterranean seaboard, since they are naturally African as well. After all, serving as an "interface" between continents and not a "neighbourhood" or "periphery" is the true geopolitical history of this region.