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Macron's Syria Game

There is a certain bullishness in French circles these days, even if there was an initial attempt, with the Macron government, to calm matters down. The need to assert Gallic might in the face of brutality has again surfaced; and has a familiar ring to it. With Syria's Bashar al-Assad getting more comfortable with military progress, officials in the United States, France and Britain are chewing finger nails and churning out policy papers of concern.

For them, Syria remains a chess piece they never quite controlled, an entity filled with failed "free" rebel fighters and packed with such agents of spoliation as murderous jihadi groups. But one group's murderous antics are another's decent balancing act in terms of strategy.

Even before US President Donald Trump decided to huff and issue the order that lead to the launch of 105 missiles from the triumvirate, France's President Emmanuel Macron was being egged on to do something. He was also egging himself on to target the Assad regime for its alleged use of chemical weapons, despite having [previously suggested](#) that there was no "legitimate successor" to the Syrian President.

This impulse to punish, to instigate the use of force for the specific purpose of correcting a supposed violation of international norms was already being [flagged last summer](#). "When you set out red lines, if you are unable to force them, then you decide to be weak."

The Syrian imbroglio has not been an easy one to define for Macron. His predecessors – Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande were of the more traditional Gallic mould of

intervention and interference, finding untrammelled sovereignty in North Africa and the Middle East a bit difficult to stomach. Macron, at least initially, found the nightmare of intervening in Libya part of a neo-conservative impulse, and issued that sober warning that failed states were hardly in France's best interest.

On the issue of chemical weapons, Hollande was punitively clear, [instructing](#) the French Air Force in the aftermath of the Ghouta attacks in August 2013 to ready for strikes on Syrian command centres linked to the attack. But he pinned such a move on joint US support. Having issued a "red line" ultimatum, US President Barack Obama signalled his wish to leave the strike party.

This instance of an ally backing down infuriated the already irritable French grouping. Assad was to be rid of, but to do so would require whole-hearted backing from Washington's war machine. France's foreign minister Laurent Fabius was all rather gung-ho about it: something needed to be done, and not getting one's hands dirty was a sign of fatal weakness.

His interpretation of the consequences arising from such vacillation were broad and inventive. By not striking Assad, claimed Fabius in a [radio interview](#) on Europe 1 in February 2016, the Western alliance bore witness to "a turning point, not only in the crisis in the Middle East, but also for Ukraine, Crimea and the World." Those horrible Russians, again, with their insatiable belligerence, their territorial hunger!

Macron is now marking himself up as a true realist, a sombre assessor of more limited aims. Less than a neo-colonial, he is a pseudo-neo-colonial, still keen to intervene in theatres of traditional French interest.

One recent example stands out: establishing a French troop presence to shadow Kurdish ambitions within the Syrian Democratic Forces from the prying moves of Turkey in north-eastern Syria while also combating Islamic State ambitions. "He assured the SDF," [went a statement](#) from the French President in March, "of France's support for the stabilization of the security zone in north-east Syria, within the framework of an inclusive and balanced governance, to prevent any resurgence of Islamic State."

He also claims to have persuaded his US counterpart to remain in Syria, despite repeated mutterings and tweets to the contrary. "Ten days ago," [claimed Macron](#) in an interview, "President Trump was saying 'the United States should withdraw from Syria.' We convinced him it was necessary to stay for the long term."

Even more of an achievement, he felt it worth noting that he had been the voice of reason for a rampant Trump itching to strike. Macron “persuaded him that we needed to limit strikes to chemical weapons [sites], after things got a little carried away over tweets.”

The US interpretation on this as unsurprising as it is predictable. “The US mission has not changed,” came White House spokeswoman Sarah Sanders. Trump had “been clear that he wants US forces to come home as quickly as possible.” Trump reiterated that sense in [his Friday speech](#) to the nation. “We cannot purge the world of evil, or act everywhere there is tyranny.” He looked “forward to the day when we can bring our warriors home.” Macron might have been reading different smoke signals, even if there was some smoke to read.

The battle over Syria as a matter of “long term” garrisons suggests a very important point for Macron’s strategy. While Russia continues its customary backing of the government of the day, the French, with moderate support from the UK and even more moderate support from Trump, are seeking a garrison presence in some form – call them what you like: specialists, experts or just plain saboteurs – to keep Syria in orbit. For them, Assad and his Russian backers cannot be permitted a free hand.