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Renaud, can you – last week, President Macron declared himself having conducted a highly successful state visit to Washington. Can you comment on the French view of this?

Renaud Girard

Thank you. On this aspect of the Chinese-American rivalry, I only wanted to take the French angle. When I studied the question, I thought that France's problem is that it is being tugged in two different directions at once. I will try to explain why, and what the consequences are, in a few minutes.

Obviously, France does not want to be stuck in the middle of the rivalry between China and the United States, the collateral victim of some Thucydides trap. That is certain.

Moreover, France realizes that it no longer carries enough demographic, economic, trade or military weight to be a major player in the great global game. Alone it does not have sufficient clout to influence the great global game because it is no longer a great power.

On the other hand, France understands that its voice can be heard because of its history as the world's leading power until Waterloo. I think the French president, Emmanuel Macron, wants to be heard. He wants to be an honest broker in all the world's conflicts.

He tried, and for this he deserves credit, to be an honest broker with Iran in Biarritz. It is not his fault if that did not work. Trump was willing to meet President Rouhani in New York, but the supreme guide Khamenei did not want it to happen. He tried with Libya, he tried with Lebanon, he tried with many crises. He obviously tried with Ukraine. He went to see Putin 10 or 15 days before the invasion. It did not work, but that is not a reason to blame him. He did the right thing by making every effort for peace.

Now he would probably like to be an honest broker between China and the United States, but I think he will be unsuccessful if he does not change his policy. I will try to explain why.

First, he saw Xi Jinping in Bali. On November 15, there was a meeting between the French and Chinese delegations. President Macron felt uneasy because his China policy had just collapsed. His policy towards China was "I'm teaming up with Germany". When Xi came to France on a state visit in March 2019, he was surprised to see the president of the



Commission, Juncker at the time, and German Chancellor Merkel in Macron's office. Together, we will be heard, he thought. Standing united makes us stronger towards China.

When Macron visited China in November 2019, he held a conference with French CEOs to uphold France's interests, because that is part of his job, but he also invited German CEOs. He cast himself as a defender of German industry.

But when Macron asked Scholz if he could accompany him to China, the German chancellor said, "No, I'm going alone." It was out of the question for Scholz to even imagine defending French business interests on his visit to China.

Macron was uncomfortable when he met Xi one-to-one on November 15. Nevertheless, the conversation started. And what did Xi say to him? Two things. The two key words in Xi's speech, which you can see on YouTube by the way, were "independence" and "openness".

He lectured France. "France was the first European country to recognize the People's Republic of China. That was General de Gaulle's policy of independence. Where is *your* independence?" What did he say about openness? "Do not behave like the Americans. Do not stop trading with us, do not end technological exchanges with us, like the Americans did."

Macron did not respond. Why? Because he did not choose. Am I, is France, aligned with the U.S.? We are aligned, Japan and South Korea are perfectly aligned with American policy and can trade with China. Or am I totally independent? He did not choose.

Choices can be made without necessarily incurring punishment. De Gaulle did not side with the United States on Vietnam, for example. He supported the United States during the Cuban missile crisis, but not during the Vietnam War. He did not do what the United Kingdom's Labour government did by remaining silent about Vietnam. De Gaulle was not neutral. He criticized the United States in his Phnom Penh speech.

That ended up working, because when the time came for negotiations, the peace talks were held in Paris. Nixon's first visit as president was to France, where he met de Gaulle in 1969. By the way, that is when de Gaulle advised him to recognize the People's Republic of China, which he did shortly afterwards. So the policy of clearly taking sides can be successful. The United States did not punish France for its independent policy.

Today, there is a sense that Macron has not chosen. Instead of responding specifically to what Xi said during their conversation in Bali, which lasted only 40 minutes, he told him, and it was a good idea, "You must help us on Ukraine." China has much more influence on Russia than France does. It is a good idea to get China on board to try and influence Russia.

The problem is that Macron asked China for a favor. When Biden saw Xi the day before, he did not ask him for anything. He simply said, "We are both going to draw red lines." It is red-line diplomacy.

Macron asked for something. If you ask for something, what will you give in return? That is the basis of diplomacy. Macron did not think of it because he is caught in the middle and has not decided.



He could have said, “If you help me influence Putin to pull out of Ukraine, I will go and see Biden in Washington—a state visit was already planned, by the way—and we will have a talk, even between the three of us. What exactly do you want from the Americans? They will not export chips to China, they will not help you with technology, but perhaps it is possible to obtain a real discussion. And I, a Frenchman, will be the honest broker. You help me on Ukraine and I will help you with the United States.”

Well no, he did not do it. I listened to Macron and Biden’s press conference and there was not one reference to China. The word “China” was not even uttered. And during a 20-minute television program where Macron summed up his trip, he did not mention China at all.

I think that as long as he does not decide, as long as he does not take a clear stand, he will not be able to do what he wants to, in other words be the honest broker between China and the United States and not a collateral victim.

This flaw is not new in French diplomacy. We made the same mistake at the NATO summit in April 2008. We vetoed Ukraine’s bid to join NATO, but it was not a real veto. It was a wishy-washy one. We said, “Not today, but maybe tomorrow.” Choices must be made. Sitting on the fence is bad diplomacy.

Either you say yes, Ukraine can join NATO right now, which is what Bush wanted, and tell Putin, who was at the 2008 Bucharest summit, “Careful, do not attack Ukraine because now it is in NATO”, or you clearly say it will never be admitted and tell Putin, “Do not use NATO’s expansion as a pretext to invade Ukraine because we have made it clear that its membership bid will always be vetoed.”

My conclusion is that today, unfortunately, this is the policy we have. Perhaps it will change. I hope it will. I think Macron is absolutely right about wanting to be an honest broker, a peacemaker. It is within France’s reach because of its reputation and history, but I think he is going about it the wrong way. When you do not choose, you do not make anybody happy.

Douglas Paal

Thank you very much, Renaud. I think we may want to come back to you and ask to what extent economic factors may be playing a role, too, in the position of France and its relations with China.