

REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Macron trolls Britain with Australia visit

French president cherry-picks from the UK's crumbling Empire 2.0.

By **ZOYA SHEFTALOVICH** | 5/3/18, 7:46 PM CET | Updated 5/10/18, 9:22 AM CET



France's President Emmanuel Macron makes a speech with the Sydney Harbor Bridge in the background | Pool photo by Peter Parks/Getty Images

SYDNEY — Just when the U.K. needs all the friends it can get, along comes Emmanuel Macron to charm away another traditional British ally.

The French president's three-day visit to Australia this week saw him sign a series of agreements pledging closer military ties and cooperation on tackling cybersecurity threats. But there was more to it than that.

Trips to Australia by top-tier global leaders are rare (Macron is only the second French president to

make the trip Down Under since consular ties were established in the mid-19th century — the first was François Hollande for the 2014 G20 summit).

That Macron made the effort — and not for a summit with other heads of state, but purely to meet with Australian leaders — was a coup. It also showed up the lackluster efforts made by the U.K. to court Australia, with whom it wants to strike a trade deal after leaving the European Union.



Macron is doing better than the Brits when it comes to wooing the U.S. — and now he's done the same in Australia.

For all its claims of a post-Brexit pivot back to the Commonwealth, Britain hasn't sent Prime Minister Theresa May to sweet-talk the bigwigs in Canberra. Instead, it sent Australia's least favorite royal couple, Charles and Camilla, whose visit last month managed only to reinvigorate Republican sentiment.

Macron's trip to Australia came hot on the heels of his triumphant Washington jaunt, where he embraced (literally and figuratively) President Donald Trump and delivered a rousing speech to Congress. While he may not have won Trump over on key issues, Macron certainly charmed him.

Meanwhile, Trump's love affair with May has been cooling. First there was Trump's canceled trip to London to open a new embassy that he said was a "bad deal," then there was a Twitter spat between the U.S. president and Britain's PM following her condemnation of his retweets of anti-Muslim videos from a far-right British political group. So much for the special relationship.



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So Macron is doing better than the Brits when it comes to wooing the U.S. — and now he's done the same in Australia.

In Sydney, Macron triggered a collective swoon not seen since Angela Merkel showed up at a bar and inspired a raucous rendition of "99 Luftballons." He's seemingly custom-built for the Aussie psyche: Neither trying too hard (that's you, Justin Trudeau) or a shameless self-publicist (Trump), Macron passes the "pub test" — he is A Bloke You Can Have A Beer With (although he'd probably have a wine or a Coke Zero).



French president Emmanuel Macron and Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull shake hands | Jason McCawley/Getty Images

Friends with benefits

A free-trade deal with Britain is nothing to sneeze at — the U.K. is Australia's fifth-largest trading partner and two-way trade was worth \$27 billion in 2016-2017. But the real prize for Australia is a pact with the EU. The bloc is Australia's second-best trading partner, with two-way trade worth \$99.6 billion.

In Sydney, Macron promised that French farmers would not stand in the way of an EU-Australia free-trade deal (despite the potential competition from their Australian counterparts that such a pact may unleash), saying "We are not wasting any time" in forging ahead with negotiations. "We will keep a close eye on interests in the agricultural field ... but I have no doubt that we can find a mutually beneficial agreement," Macron said.

It's not just on trade that Macron hit the sweet spot.

Australia, reckoning with Beijing's push in the Asia-Pacific region and a scandal involving Chinese state influence in Canberra, was hungry for a reminder it has European friends. Accompanied on his trip by French military and naval contractors, Macron reiterated the importance of defense cooperation, underscored by a \$50 billion submarine deal awarded by the government in 2016 to France's majority state-owned Naval Group.

At a press conference with Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Macron highlighted that France had a stake in the region — New Caledonia and French Polynesia in the South Pacific and Reunion Island in the Indian Ocean — and noted that France wanted to be "at the heart of a new Indo-Pacific axis."

"I would very much like France, given it is the last European member of the EU being present in the

Pacific after the Brexit ... to be at the heart of this project,” Macron said. “This region is crucial for the stability of the world.”

Pepé le amused

Even #Deliciousgate worked in Macron’s favor.

After calling Turnbull’s wife Lucy “delicious” at a press conference on Wednesday, the Daily Telegraph tabloid mocked up a photo of the French president as the famous, and amorous, Looney Toons skunk with the headline: “President Pepé le Pew.”



Emmanuel Macron, center, with Malcolm and Lucy Turnbull | Ludovic Marin/AFP via Getty Images

But in a smooth move, Macron told reporters the front page “made me laugh a lot, especially since in the original cartoon the character has a French accent.”

The Australian public liked what they heard. And so, it seems, did the Turnbolls.

“Lucy was very flattered,” Malcolm Turnbull told reporters Thursday. “She has asked me to say she found the president’s compliment as charming as it was memorable ... President Macron charmed Australia. He certainly charmed all of us.”

Take that, Theresa May.



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.@EmmanuelMacron, visiblement très amusé par la une du @dailytelegraph où sa tête a été remplacée par celle de "Pepé le Pew", personnage des Looney Tunes (Instagram @soazigdlm) #MacronSydney