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Rebuilding Trust: An interview with Ambassador Étienne, France’s Ambassador to the United States

Ambassador Philippe Étienne leads the French Embassy to the United States. He is an expert on the European Union and has held numerous posts within the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, including Permanent Representative of France to the European Union (2009–14), Ambassador of France to Germany (2014–17) and most recently, Diplomatic Advisor to the President (2017–19).

Ambassador Étienne spoke with Kim Montgomery, Director of International Affairs and Science Diplomacy and Executive Editor of *Science & Diplomacy*, on France’s science diplomacy strategy. This is the eighth interview in the Ambassador Interview Series.

Kim Montgomery (Interviewer): *Since becoming the Ambassador of France to the United States in 2019, you have had several eventful years that have included the COVID-19 pandemic, a US Presidential election, and being recalled to France this past September. Since then, you have returned to the Embassy and President Biden and President Macron have discussed the way forward. As the Ambassador and former chief diplomatic advisor to President Macron, what are your priorities for the US-France bilateral relationship?*

Ambassador Philippe Étienne: First, it is good to remember that France and the United States have a unique history of friendship and cooperation in all fields, and the past months have reminded us how interdependent we are, and why we need to strengthen our multiple partnerships to face an increasingly competitive international environment. President Macron has entrusted me with the mission of rebuilding trust between our two countries. That is what I am working on with my American interlocutors, implementing the way forward, as stated in the joint statement that President Macron and President Biden agreed upon in October 2021 in Rome.

Montgomery: *Last November, the Embassy celebrated the 100th anniversary of Marie Skłodowska Curie's historic visit to the United States to receive one gram of radium from US President Harding. The event at the Embassy included descendants of Dr. Curie and Mrs. W.B. Meloney, the American benefactress who launched the campaign to raise the funds for the radium, since Dr. Curie had decided not to patent radium. What can you tell us about the importance of this trip 100 years later? What is the state of Dr. Curie's legacy in France and abroad, particularly in the United States?*

Ambassador Étienne: The story behind the visit of Marie Curie to the United States is one of friendship not only between two women, but also two nations. It is a demonstration of the strength and longevity of US-French friendship and collaboration. The fact that we are celebrating it 100 years later only goes to show how enduring our ties have been over the past century.

This event that took place on November 8, 2021 at the Embassy was a great opportunity to reaffirm our shared commitment to the advancement of science. The timing of this event could not have been better as we took the opportunity to set our main priorities for the next hundred years in medical research collaboration.

Dr. Curie's trip to the U.S. spurred Franco-American collaboration among the universities that she visited as well. An example of Dr. Curie's legacy is the long-standing collaboration between the Institut Curie and the National Cancer Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in the United States. During her visit, Dr. Curie also received support from the American Association of University Women, who found in her a role model. This association is more active than ever.

It is important to note that, in France, Dr. Curie is still celebrated as one of the greatest scientists in history. Her legacy lives through Institut Curie, a non-profit foundation operating a research center on biophysics, cell biology, and oncology, in addition to the many generations that have found inspiration in her remarkable achievements. Born in Poland, Curie is also celebrated in her home country; the

institute named after her in Warsaw has numerous collaborations with Institut Curie. Polish representatives were invited to the event commemorating the anniversary of this visit.

Montgomery: *Since 2013, the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs has had strategic guidelines on the country's science diplomacy strategy. How does France's science diplomacy strategy relate to the AAAS-Royal Society framework on science diplomacy, published in 2010? What can you tell us about the Ministry's most recent guidelines?*

Ambassador Étienne: When it comes to science diplomacy, France is working hard to produce concrete results. Our country consistently ranks amongst the top countries regarding indicators such as the percentage of GDP devoted to research and development, the number of researchers per million inhabitants, and the number of scientific articles published every year. In addition, France is among the few countries to have an active strategy when it comes to science diplomacy.

France's approach to science diplomacy has several guidelines, including asserting France's presence in international scientific fora, but also enhancing partnerships between research institutes and public diplomacy. It also involves supporting French companies' innovation strategies and the scientific community's work on research for development.

France's strategy is aligned with the AAAS-Royal Society's threefold approach: we value science in diplomacy, acknowledging the need for evidence-based foreign policy making and science-based approaches, especially when it comes to environmental treaties or health regulations. We deploy diplomacy for science, working to attract scientists to our academic settings and otherwise valuing research mobility; our diplomatic network is fully committed to fostering scientific collaboration with our partner countries. And we promote science for diplomacy; scientific ties between France and other countries are a vital component of our international partnerships and have proven to be a solid foundation in times of tension.

On December 6 and 7, 2021, the sixth Joint Committee Meeting on Science and Technology Cooperation between France and the United States was held in Washington, DC, hosted by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP). Eric Lander, former head of OSTP and Science Advisor to the President, and Frédérique Vidal, French Minister of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation led the conversation. Scientific experts from both countries convened to discuss avenues for enhanced collaboration in the fields of health, environment, and emerging technologies. This high-level event embodies our

science diplomacy strategy: continued dialogue and the use of diplomacy as a means to advance science.

Montgomery: *France is one of the founding members of the European Union (EU) and has been a strong supporter of European integration. You are an expert on the EU and continental Europe, and have held posts in Moscow, Belgrade, Bucharest, Bonn, Berlin, and Brussels. France has held the Council of the EU Presidency since January. What are France's priorities for the EU Presidency? What is the role of science in that agenda?*

Ambassador Étienne: On December 9, 2021, President Macron unveiled a roadmap for the 2022 French Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which started on January 1, 2022 and will last for six months.

Our main priorities for the EU Presidency are strengthening our economies to enable Europe to achieve its ecological and digital transition; actively exercising the right to defend and promote our values and interests; and maintaining a sense of belonging to build and develop a common European vision around shared culture, values, and history.

As a leading country for research and innovation, France has three goals for its EU Presidency: first, to support the European Universities Initiative, a growing bottom-up network of universities across the EU working on common projects; second, to encourage a globally unified strategy towards international cooperation; and last, to consolidate synergies between academia, research, and innovation within the scope of the European Research Area, a plan to create a single, borderless market for research stakeholders. This will be achieved in the framework of Horizon Europe, the EU's €95.5 billion (US\$106 billion) key funding program for research and innovation. Our research will be an asset in the reinforcement of our European sovereignty.

Montgomery: *France has a unique relation with the African continent, particularly with French-speaking Africa. In modern times, France has tried to mend some colonial-era wrongdoing, including the restitution of historical artifacts to countries like Benin. In what other ways is France rebuilding its relationship with Africa through science diplomacy? How does this fit into a broader French science diplomacy strategy towards the global South?*

Ambassador Étienne: France supports new forms of academic, scientific, and research cooperation throughout Africa. Many recognized French scientific organizations have branches in Africa, including the National Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), the Agricultural Research Center for International Development (CIRAD), the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the National Research Agency for AIDS and Hepatitis (ANRS), and

Institut Pasteur. These scientific organizations have an important network and long-standing partnerships with African research institutes. In particular, they contribute to promoting the training and mobility of young researchers as well as their integration into international teams.

France has increased its scientific collaboration with many African countries in the last decade. During the French-US Joint Committee Meeting that I mentioned earlier, both parties emphasized their will to enhance scientific cooperation in low and middle-income countries, with a focus on capacity building for pandemic preparedness.

The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs also funds 160 French archeological missions in 60 countries, thus putting bilateral cooperation with the Global South in service of the protection of world heritage.

France is also at the forefront of helping African countries train their workforce in France, through mobility programs, and locally. In 2017, France launched the National Program for the Urgent Aid and Reception of Scientists in Exile (PAUSE), aimed at accommodating and protecting researchers from countries in which the political situation places their work and families in danger.

Montgomery: *You have a diploma in mathematics, which is not typical of career diplomats. How has having a STEM background influenced your diplomatic career and the way you approach scientific advice as a diplomat? How relevant are science diplomats to France's diplomatic corps?*

Ambassador Étienne: Mathematics in diplomacy is very useful, as it brings rigor to deconstruct a problem, isolate the variables, and find a solution. We are currently enduring multiple crises with many stakeholders and many variables at multiple levels.

Science diplomats are an invaluable asset of France's diplomatic corps. Most science diplomats are not career diplomats, and they use their past experiences and knowledge in service of their country's representation abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs benefits greatly from the diversity of backgrounds within its workforce.

Montgomery: *The French Embassy has a strong history of supporting science policy and science diplomacy, including having an Office for Science and Technology (OST) staffed with professors and senior researchers, as well as hosting the Science Diplomats Club (SDC), a forum for science diplomats to network and receive briefings on key science and technology issues. How do the OST and SDC work to promote science diplomacy?*

Ambassador Étienne: OST is headed by our Science Counselor and run by 22 scientific and diplomatic experts both in Washington and across the United States in our consulates. In addition, some of the main French research institutes like the previously mentioned National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), the National Center for Space Studies (CNES), the Alternative Energies and Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), the National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM), and the National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment (INRAE) have representatives within our Embassy, making it the biggest scientific network of all French embassies in the world. Our embassy, through the OST, runs a number of mobility programs, joint research funding schemes, bilateral funds, and startup accelerators, all aimed at fostering ties between our two countries.

OST is at the crossroads of science and diplomacy. While we work to enhance French-US partnerships between entities such as universities, research institutes, and governments, and encourage bilateral scientific agreements, we maintain a realistic approach to scientific collaboration. As such, the OST works closely with the French Ministries of Foreign Affairs and of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation to protect our intellectual property while still allowing other countries to benefit from the excellence of French research.

Montgomery: *To conclude, as the world starts re-opening and resuming travel, what are some highlights in France to visit, including science-related destinations?*

Ambassador Étienne: France co-hosts the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) with Switzerland, and at the France-Switzerland border is the Large Hadron Collider (LHC), the world's largest and highest-energy particle collider, built in a tunnel 27 kilometers in circumference and as deep as 175 meters underground. This is definitely a must for science enthusiasts.

Other educational science hotspots across the country are also worth a visit, including the *Cité des sciences et de l'industrie* in Paris, a museum for all ages dedicated to the progress of science, and the *Cité de l'espace* in Toulouse, a discovery center celebrating the city's exceptional contributions to aviation and the conquest of space, featuring full-scale models of the Ariane 5 rocket as well as the Mir and Soyuz space modules.

Overall, France has numerous world-famous museums, as well as incredible landscapes, world heritage sites, and food we hope you can experience in your next visit. **SD**