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François Hollande and French Foreign Policy: Between Virtù and Fortuna

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JOHN GAFFNEY, MAY 23 2012

Given France's importance as a world power, a member of the UN Security Council, the world's fifth largest economy, a nuclear power, and the most active political player in the European Union, the orientations, challenges, opportunities and possible outcomes of French foreign policy under President Hollande, now and over the next five years, are of fundamental importance to everyone. The irony is that no one mentioned foreign policy in six months of campaigning for the presidential elections (if we count the Socialist Party primaries, a year). So our answer to the question 'Whither France in the world?' should really be 'Err...well we don't know, because no one has told us'. Ignoring foreign policy is becoming the stuff of domestic campaigns everywhere. In France, the electorate is less interested in France's overseas *grandeur* and *rayonnement* than in the price of artichokes. And so it should be. And yet this office, the presidency of the French Republic, of all offices – Charles de Gaulle's hot seat, is quintessentially linked to *grandeur* and *rayonnement*; and if you covet the office, you'd better have some. In fact, the French presidency was almost made for foreign policy initiatives. And not just made to take foreign policy initiatives but to be *à la hauteur* of them; to step up onto that stage and take up arms against the dragons in the defence of that beautiful creature, France.

To be French President was to be ready, willing, and eager to take on, even initiate, the *grandes querelles* of this world, as de Gaulle used to call French foreign policy. Without those quarrels, the French presidency actually looks rather bizarre: all the other Europeans go about their business with a down-to-Earth Prime Minister or Chancellor. France, on the other hand, needs all the pomp and circumstance of history's eyes upon its men of destiny (to date, only men) to meet the heady challenges of France's leading role in the world. Everyone else groans when the French enter the room invoking their own unbearable sense of themselves, but we would all be worse off without them. De Gaulle dared to contest the hegemony of the superpowers; and each French President since: Pompidou, Giscard, Mitterrand, Chirac, and Sarkozy has played a leading world role since – most recently with Chirac remonstrating with the mighty Americans for going unprepared into Iraq (echoing de Gaulle telling them not to escalate in Vietnam), and Sarkozy, brokering peace with the Russians in Georgia, and leading the way in the war in Libya, averting the massacre of civilians with the use of *Rafale* fighter planes.

What of President Hollande, Mr Normal, as he would have himself – a President, moreover, without a nano-second of government experience, let alone international experience? Whither France, indeed.

Hating Europe

It is strange that during the election campaign, Nicolas Sarkozy did not make more of his foreign policy achievements to try and throw Hollande's lack of any experience into relief. Even in the interminable three hour debate between the two men in the last week of an interminable election campaign, only for a desultory ten minutes at the end (when most people had given up and gone to bed) did the candidates talk of their foreign policy proposals.

Well, that is not strictly speaking true. If we count European and EU politics as part of foreign policy, there was at least some discussion of France and its neighbours. Not that the discussions were particularly positive. For Sarkozy, a lot of his European policy proposals in his campaign for reelection consisted of saying – flirting with xenophobia –

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that he would abandon the Schengen border agreements and pull up the drawbridge. Hollande, he flirting with anti-German feeling, said he would re-negotiate the European Fiscal Treaty, so painstakingly drawn up by Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy. In fact, virtually every candidate was anti-European, and the pro-European centrist, François Bayrou, hardly made a squeak about Europe. It is doubly strange given that both Sarkozy and Hollande are actually committed pro-Europeans. Hollande pretends to be the spiritual son of the Florentine François Mitterrand. He is actually the spiritual son of the eminently European Jacques Delors, and in days gone by used to say so on every possible occasion (much to the lasting irritation of Delors' actual daughter, and Hollande's rival for the party's presidential nomination in 2011, Martine Aubry).

The Emperor's new clothes

Hollande arrived in power in May 2012 without much of a European or a foreign policy narrative at all, certainly nothing to positively go and tell his old mentor Jacques Delors about. And yet he was immediately thrown into a series of top-level international meetings, the relentless intensity of which no incoming leader had ever seen, and which would orientate French foreign policy, and define Hollande's presidency, his status, his allies, his future, and his image for the quinquennate; and we should remember that the disastrous image of his rival, Nicolas Sarkozy, was forged as early as the night of his election victory five years earlier when he celebrated with his rich friends in a Champs Elysée restaurant. We could argue that Hollande won in 2012 because Sarkozy badly organised his first three weeks in office in 2007.

On the day of his inauguration, Hollande had to fly to Berlin to talk to Angela Merkel about the Fiscal Treaty. And it is worth pointing out that down the years, all French attempts to make the Germans agree to something Germany thought was politically or economically unsound, have ended in the French going home empty handed. The piper payer usually calls the tune.

After that, it was to the US for a first meeting with Barack Obama (to tell him he was pulling French troops out of Afghanistan), then to a G8 summit (which he used to say were a waste of time), then to a NATO summit (he opposed France's reintegration into NATO's military command structure), then the G20 summit (in part a Sarkozy invention), then, immediately, a European summit in Brussels. Not exactly going with the grain of international relations in your first three weeks. Metternich and Kissinger would have found this lot taxing. This was a series of challenges of breathtaking complexity for a man whose recent overseas experience amounted to little more than put-putting around Greek islands on his motor scooter with his companion, Valérie Trierweiler.

Virtù, Fortuna, and Lady Luck

Two weeks in and he has been doing rather well! And we may be facing an unusual phenomenon in French politics: some politicians, through a difficult to analyze combination of *virtù* and *fortuna*, are *lucky*.

When, at the start of his presidential campaign, François Hollande said he wanted to renegotiate the Eurozone Fiscal Treaty (essentially, make the Germans go back on their painstakingly elaborated treaty, and pump more money into the European economy), people laughed. It sounded as if Hollande was just making it up, and that he would pay the price with stockmarket chaos, as well as Mrs Merkel's ire if he didn't measure his words more. In the event, *fortuna* has been good to him. It soon became clear that he was not alone in wanting more emphasis on growth and less on austerity. Many, including such sound voices as *The Economist*, were coming to the same conclusion. Italy piped up, as did Greece, even the German SPD – who earlier had winced at Hollande's assertions – started to look kindly on the idea. People began to remark that the Treaty had not yet been ratified by the participating governments (ironically, Greece being one of the few who had). The German CDU got a drubbing in the May North-Rhine Westphalia elections, and Mrs Merkel, herself facing further elections in 2013, began to change her tune. The vice-like grip of austerity seemed both politically as well as economically questionable. And whoever is right is *really* right, because the Franco-German relationship is at the core of European cooperation and prosperity, and it is France's overriding foreign policy imperative. If the Eurozone goes for some growth, it looks as if one person had been right all along. François Hollande! He knew he had, two days later, to fly off to the US to tell Obama he was pulling French troops out of Afghanistan early. When he got there, Obama told him the US wanted stimulus growth in Europe too! It

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is true that the US, Germany, and France, all mean very different things when they talk of a growth strategy for Europe and the Eurozone. Nevertheless, the devil is only in the detail, so we can worry about that another time. For the moment, Hollande looked not just competent in Washington, Camp David and Chicago; but even possessing of forethought, and confounding of his critics.

Luck and Friends

To tell the leader of the Free World that he, Hollande, having to distinguish himself from his main rival in the French presidential campaign, had said that he was going to withdraw French troops early from Afghanistan is not an easy thing to bring up in your first meeting. But once again, luckily for Hollande, 'Home for Christmas' is logistically near impossible – once again, misfortune is transformed into good fortune. You can't get 3,500 troops, 900 vehicles, 1,400 containers (at a cost of over 100 million euros) out of Afghanistan (and right now, not through Pakistan) in time. Hollande will withdraw the troops, but in a way that will not trigger the fury of the Americans (who really do find the French more infuriating than everyone else most of the time), while not losing face by dismaying Hollande's domestic audience. Perhaps fortuitously, Obama himself, four years earlier, had made promises he could not keep.

Instead, the elegant Obama could just tease his new French colleague about French fries and about the fact that he could, if he wanted, take his tie off with his new friends. So far, François, so good. It won't always be like this. Cuts in spending – in defence especially – are looming, as are a mountain of other problems. Luckily, once again, Hollande has in his Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, and his Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, two trusted colleagues from way back when, both willing to do anything for their master (including, probably, falling on their swords). The mountain of issues awaiting, however, is truly Himalayan: the Arab Spring, Syria, North Africa (especially Tunisia), Iran, Sub-Saharan Africa. A first thing to say is that many of these states are happy with a Hollande presidency. In his desperate attempts to beat off the challenge from the far right, Sarkozy's campaign, particularly as regards immigration, angered many of these African States, with its undertones of colonialism and even – intended or not – racism. And France's former colonies really are ready for a new kind of relationship with the Motherland, who has sometimes been anything but maternal. Another piece of good fortune for the new President as he moves forward into what is, for him, uncharted territory, is that – for better or worse – the territory is charted, well, kind of.

Raison d'état en question

There has been, certainly since de Gaulle, arguably since the end of World War II, a certain logic driving French foreign policy, which means that divergences on domestic policy have not been reflected in huge differences in foreign policy. Even the Communists when in government with the Socialists in the early 1980s and again in the late 1990s did not counter mainstream foreign policy (and indeed in certain areas were very 'Gaullist' in their approach). There is a tension between the more Gaullist approaches and the more 'Atlanticist' ones, but even here the changes are evolutions of policy, not breaks of policy. And the Atlanticist and Gaullist strains within French thought do not really oppose individuals, rather they exist within the fabric of French thought, and even within the individuals themselves, like Giscard and Mitterrand, in fact all of them, even de Gaulle, Gaullist on some issues, more Atlanticist on others.

Hollande, opposed at the time when Sarkozy reintegrated it, won't take France out of NATO's military command structure. And Hollande's and the French Socialist Party's overall foreign policy has not been markedly dissimilar from the mainstream right's. Although, it might have been a good idea if it had. The French left has had ten years (2002-2012) to revisit, redefine, and recast everything from ideology to policy, including developing foreign policy orientations which would better adapt France to a globalising world (and its former colonies). Instead, their leaders spent most of the decade recasting nothing, and fighting like cats in a bag amongst themselves (and, arguably, throwing away their presidential hopes in both 2002 and 2007). That is a real shame, for new ideas and approaches from the intelligent, sophisticated, and politically thoughtful French would be so welcome in the world today, given the challenges the world faces.

Nevertheless, Hollande has yet another two pieces of good fortune, or rather two people.

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So much luck it looks like Virtù

Pierre Moscovici, the new Finance Minister, is a committed and able Europe specialist. He is one of the best brains in the party (although he too was occasionally a cat in the bag). And his approach to France's finances is to adopt strategies to address the Eurozone crisis, so that economic and financial policy will be elaborated with a close eye on France in the wider European context. Finally, there is the person Hollande chose to be in charge of foreign policy (and European policy, for the Foreign Minister is also the European policy supremo in France), Laurent Fabius. If you are a President, in charge of everything, but are not strong or experienced in a particular policy area, make sure you choose someone who is. And Hollande has chosen Fabius, the most experienced and, arguably, along with Lionel Jospin (Prime Minister, 1997-2002), the cleverest (also, however, a former cat in the bag), and most authoritative Socialist leader of them all. Again, like Moscovici, Fabius, the most experienced politician in the PS, lends enormous authority to President Hollande's developing policy. It is true he harkens back to an earlier socialism (he was Prime Minister 1984-1988) which some African leaders are a little hesitant about (although his '84-86 government's foreign policy was very progressive on such issues as *Apartheid*). And he needs to make sure he doesn't appear to eclipse the President (and he did once say when told of Hollande's pretensions to the presidency: 'Hollande? You must be joking'); but he remains the most appropriate figure to lead France in an imaginative, authoritative, and perhaps innovative direction.

Hollande needs quickly – though he hasn't got much time – to develop with Fabius and others a new foreign policy rhetoric and narrative that will define his presidency, but for today at least, François Hollande is one of the luckiest politicians in the history of the Fifth Republic. It remains to be seen whether he may turn out to be one the most skillful.

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