

Whither French Foreign Policy: same horns, same dilemma?

Written by John Keiger

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JOHN KEIGER, MAR 3 2010

'Misunderstanding the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past. But it is perhaps just as futile to struggle to understand the past if one knows nothing of the present'. Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien*, (Paris: Armand Colin, 1952), 13.

The 2008 French White Paper on Defence and National Security set out two principal ambitions for France's long term role in the world: a European and a transatlantic one.[2] The White Paper called for the December 2007 signing of the Lisbon Treaty to mark a new stage in the development of a European common foreign and security policy.

A year later at the Sixtieth Anniversary Summit of the Atlantic Alliance, hosted in Strasbourg/Kehl on 3/4 April 2009, France rejoined NATO's integrated military command, which it had left in 1966 under President Charles de Gaulle.

Traditionally it is Britain that is depicted as caught on the horns of dilemma between a European and a Transatlantic commitment. Yet, in reality, that dilemma has been just as much a feature of French as British diplomacy since the beginning of the twentieth century and still is.

There is in French foreign policy, more than for many states, over the *longue durée* a remarkable continuity, which should not be surprising if foreign policy postures are to reflect national interests. Yet, there is a tendency with historians, and political scientists, to analyse events over the short term and to choose, very subjectively, 'turning points' either to fit pre-conceived ideas about individual political leaders or to comply rather too tidily with traditional historical date boundaries for events. In this way foreign policy analysis can fall victim to watershed dates that obscure long term trends.

For much of the twentieth century French power was at the service of two objectives: to limit the German threat and to satisfy the French ambition of playing a world role.[3] But France has been sufficiently conscious of her declining power to understand that she could achieve neither without the support of other states. As the First World War ended France had two alternative routes for realizing her dual ambition. The first was to gain the support or acquiescence in those objectives from the Anglo-Americans, both of whom became a source of frustration and friction for her. The second was Europe, as a means of limiting German power and as a force multiplier for French influence abroad. The emphasis on European or transatlantic relations has fluctuated according to various contingencies, but has been a feature of French foreign and defence policy for nearly a century. Things are no different under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, nor are they likely to be in the foreseeable future.

Much of French foreign policy in the 1920s was about gaining Anglo-American support to provide security against a potentially resurgent Germany and to allow France to play her world role unencumbered. When frustrated by their reticence she sought a European solution.

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From the outset of the First World War until 1916, French leaders placed their faith in relations with Russia, Britain, Belgium and Italy. But following the United States' entry in 1917 and the subsequent dominance of the Anglo-Americans in Allied strategy, French premier Georges Clemenceau, together with a number of his closest advisors, came to believe that future international relations would rest predominantly in the hands of London and Washington. Thus America's entry to the War signalled to Clemenceau an Atlantic rather than a largely European answer to France's interests[4]. This explains Clemenceau's quest at the end of the War to seal an agreement with her democratic partners, London and Washington, likely to guarantee France's security vis a vis Germany in Europe and thereby allow her to resume her world role. In this he was momentarily successful in 1919, but denied the prize when in the following year the American Senate refused to ratify the agreement.

Unable to revive that Atlantic guarantee, or even its British arm, France increasingly looked towards a European solution to ensure French security and freedom of manoeuvre in the 1920s. By 1925 this took the form of the Locarno collective security system for the European continent. Its logical extension was the 1929-30 still-born Briand Plan for a United States of Europe, foreshadowing the European community. From 1932 at the international disarmament conference French proposals for a new European security arrangement were blocked by the Germans and the Anglo-Saxons, as were proposals by premiers Tardieu and Herriot for a European regional defence pact to act as an extension of Locarno under the aegis of the League of Nations. Herriot's desire to accommodate London and Washington by making concessions to Germany on reparations in order to avoid provoking US isolationism in December 1932 provoked the premier's fall 'into the folds of the star spangled banner' in December 1932.[5] Here again was clear evidence of France's difficulty in squaring the circle of building European security while satisfying the Anglo-Saxons.

The swing away from a European solution to an Atlantic one was rekindled in the late 1930s, albeit again in vain, as Hitler's Germany threatened France and finally over-ran her in 1940. With the ending of the Second World War France's political leaders were once more focused on securing guarantees for French long term security. Again they attempted to square the circle of either the European or Atlantic solutions.

From 1944-5 France's leader, General de Gaulle, pursued both solutions. In 1944 he secretly sought a military guarantee from Britain and the USA using deputy chief of the general staff, General Billotte, as an envoy to the United States, thereby beginning the process that would lead to the signing of the NATO treaty in April 1949. At the same time he sought to constitute a western European confederation that would guarantee France's security and 'allow us to maintain our independence and to escape the Americano-Russian condominium', as he told Pierre Mendes-France in 1944.[6] But this latter position was much criticized at the time in French political and administrative circles as too ambitious. In the end the Atlantic eclipsed the European solution and France finally achieved in 1949 the American security guarantee that she had dreamed of since 1919 allowing her, unrealistically, to look to her global ambitions.

Of course, the pendulum did not stop there. Through the 1950s Europe increasingly became a focus of French attention, as signalled by the 1954 European Defence Community and, following the 1956 Suez fiasco, the commitment to European integration. It was when the European communities were in place and France was more self-confident that her new leader from 1958, General de Gaulle, gradually began to distance Paris from the Atlantic Alliance until finally withdrawing from NATO's integrated command in 1966.

Since the First World War France has been a 'great power without greatness'[7], largely as a result of the mismatch between her international ambitions and her modest means. For that reason her relationship with the United States and Europe has been characterized by alternation and fluctuation. France's attitude to the United States over the *longue durée*, its fluctuations, its blowing hot and cold, has been all about managing France's own limited power in the most pragmatic of ways. It has always to be borne in mind that France's power is inextricably linked to her national identity both domestically and abroad. In recent times, as leaders from de Gaulle to Sarkozy have reconciled themselves to France playing more of a European role they have felt the need to convince themselves that all the same France is not renouncing its world role[8]. There is the lingering feeling that 'the more we are Europeans the more we can be a world power'. Similar ambivalence is alive in relation to the United States. Sarkozy is reported to have stated in relation to France's return to the NATO command structure: 'The more we are friends with the

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Americans, the more we can be independent.'[9]

As has been demonstrated, there is nothing new in this ambivalent approach. Once again it is merely a French leader wishing to square the circle of having both Atlantic and European guarantees for French security that will allow her to play the world role to which she has always aspired. This is reflected in the words of French General Henri Bentégeat, President of the EU Military Committee, who stated in April 2008: 'I think that if France normalizes its relations with NATO, European defense projects will become easier to progress'[10] Certainly Sarkozy's desire to square the circle of closer relations with the United States and Europe was openly admitted by the President on 11 March 2009 when announcing France's reintegration of NATO's command. Remarking upon the symbolism of the venue for his announcement, the Marshal Foch amphitheatre in the Ecole Militaire in Paris, Sarkozy stated: 'he [Foch] was the first commander in chief of the European and US Allied forces during the First World War. The concept of ally and friend doesn't date from the beginning of my five-year term. At times, I get the feeling it's totally new. So you've made my task easier in the Amphithéâtre Foch.'[11] Whether Sarkozy will be able to forge that symbiosis is unclear; traditionally French power has been insufficient to balance effectively the Atlantic and European solutions to her satisfaction. Indeed, Sarkozy may already be experiencing the difficulty of his predecessors. France has been disappointed by the lukewarm response to her return to the NATO fold by her Allies, in particular Britain, partly because Sarkozy has linked reintegration to developments in the European defence arena which makes Britain nervous.[12]

From the beginning of the twentieth century France's foreign and defence policy has been impaled on the horns of a dilemma: whether to seek a European or a transatlantic solution to her security problems. Since coming to power in 2007 Nicolas Sarkozy appears to wish to embrace the European and Atlantic routes in equal measure. If French history is anything to go by he may not be able to sustain that position for long.

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John Keiger is Professor of International History in the University of Salford and a specialist of French foreign and defence policy, in particular the bureaucratic politics of policy formulation and execution. His main books include: *France and the Origins of the First World War* (Macmillan, 1983), *Raymond Poincaré* (CUP, 1997), *France and the World Since 1870* (Hodder/OUP, 2001). He is preparing a comparative study of the British and French foreign offices' reactions to the European ideal from the end of the First World War to the Treaty of Rome.

[1] The theme of this article is developed more fully in J.F.V.Keiger, 'The 'Novelty' of Sarkozy's Foreign Policy Towards NATO and the US? The Long View', *European Political Science*, Volume 9, no 2, May 2010.

[2] *Défense et sécurité nationale. Le Livre Blanc* (2008) 'Préface de Nicolas Sarkozy', Paris: Odile Jacob/La Documentation Française, chapter 4 'L'ambition européenne', chapter 5 'La rénovation transatlantique', pp. 81-112. The previous *livre blanc* also had 'L'ambition européenne' and 'Une Alliance atlantique renouvelée' as priorities cf, *Livre Blanc sur la Défense*, SIRPA, Ministère de la Défense, 1994, pp. 31, 34.

[3] See J.F.V.Keiger, *France and the World Since 1870*, Arnold/Oxford University Press, 2001

[4] Soutou, Georges-Henri, 'Le deuil de la puissance (1914-1958)' in J.C. Allain et al. (eds.), *Histoire de la diplomatie française*, Paris: Perrin, 2005, p. 752.

[5] Ibid., pp. 778-82.

[6] Jean Lacouture, 1981: p. 159, quoted in Soutou, p. 812.

[7] Robert Frank (2000) 'La France et son rapport au monde au XXe siècle', *Politique Etrangère* 3 (4) p. 834.

[8] Ibid, p. 838

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[9] Kern, S. (2008) 'France Wants to Join NATO to Ease the Way for European Defense', 23 April, *World Politics Review Exclusive*, accessed 15 July 2008.

[10] Ibid

[11] Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et Européennes (2009) 'Closing Remarks', *France, European Defence and NATO in the Twenty-First Century*, Ecole Militaire, Paris, <https://pastel.diplomatie.gouv.fr/editorial/actual/ael2/bulletin.gb.asp?liste=20090313.gb.html>, accessed 14 March 2009.

[12] Cameron, A. and Maulny, J.P. (2009) 'France's NATO Reintegration. Fresh Views with the Sarkozy Presidency ?', RUSI Occasional Paper, Feb 2009, p.3.