The Reluctant Atlanticist: France’s Security and Defence Policy in a Transatlantic Context

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The Reluctant Atlanticist: France’s Security and Defence Policy in a Transatlantic Context

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the key tenets of French foreign and security policy during the Cold War, and illustrates the deep challenges to the French consensus raised by the emergence of a unipolar system. There is a growing gap between the rhetoric of French security policy, emphasizing ‘autonomy’ and ‘sovereignty’ out of habit from the Cold War, and the actual security practices showing a gradual embedding within the transatlantic security structures. In the absence of a new transpartisan grand narrative relevant for the contemporary international system, such embedding is easily portrayed in France as a ‘treason’ from a romanticized Gaullist foreign policy.

KEYWORDS: France; Defence Policy; Gaullism; International System; NATO

‘Vive la France!’ tweeted US Senator John McCain, after Paris tried (unsuccessfully in the end) to impose more restraining conditions on the deal between the world’s leading powers and Tehran over Iran’s nuclear development programme. ‘Thank God for France,’ added Senator Lindsey Graham. The contrast with the way US officials (particularly from the Republican Party) used to mention France in the previous decade could not be stronger. Gone is the ‘Freedom Fries’ era when Condoleezza Rice wanted to ‘punish France’ for opposing the invasion of Iraq out of (justified, as it turned out) concerns that it would durably destabilize the Middle East, and former undersecretary of defense Jed Babbin (MSNBC’s ‘Hardball’, 30 January 2003) could declare: ‘going to war without France is like going deer hunting without your accordion. You just leave a lot of useless noisy baggage behind’. Nowadays, US think-tanks praise the French armed forces for their quick and effective action in Mali and France’s fight against jihadist movements; soldiers from the US Marine Corps openly express their admiration for the fighting spirit, tactical skills and

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1Michael Shurkin, France’s War in Mali. Lessons for an Expeditionary Army (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation 2014).

preparedness of French soldiers;\(^3\) and a Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff forges an ‘unmistakable bond’ with his French counterpart.\(^4\)

But American policy-makers have not simply changed their perception of French security policy. France actually seems to become closer to the United States. First, France re-joined NATO’s integrated command structure in 2008, in a move designed to raise its influence within the alliance but also overcome an old source of transatlantic tension.\(^5\) Second, President Nicolas Sarkozy decided to significantly increase the French contribution to the International Security and Assistance (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan,\(^6\) a choice that was well perceived by the United States. Third, as mentioned above, French military activities in the Sahel against jihadist groups as well as the participation in the US-led coalition against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria further improved France’s image in the United States. To be fair, even at the worst time of the Franco-American crisis following the French government’s opposition to the Iraq War, cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism and counter-piracy always remained strong. But it is clear that something is qualitatively changing in the way France is becoming integrated within the transatlantic security structure. In order to appreciate the magnitude of this change, some historical context is necessary.

**The French Exception in the Transatlantic Security Order**

In 1958, when Charles de Gaulle came to power, he found France embroiled in the Algerian conflict, and already increasingly concerned about military developments within NATO, which were perceived as threatening France’s autonomy.\(^7\) His foreign policy has fascinated French and international historians alike,\(^8\) and was a subject of simultaneous irritation and interest from France’s partners at the time. French historian Maurice Vaïsse found a very effective way of summarizing de Gaulle’s foreign policy with the term ‘grandeur’ (greatness):\(^9\) de Gaulle had a grand strategic design, and a means to achieve it. The grand strategic design was to ensure the return

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of France’s presence everywhere in the world, create an autonomous Europe open to Africa, decrease the tensions with the Eastern bloc and establish relations with China. The intellectual cornerstone of this grand strategic design was a cult of sovereignty for its own sake, found among other Western states (for example the UK), but with a specific Gallic turn. In France, the intellectual defence of sovereignty has been intertwined with the specific centralized form taken by the State and the importance of the Executive branch in public affairs. De Gaulle’s defence of sovereignty also had a more personal dimension: owing much of its intellectual education to Charles Maurras’ Action Française, de Gaulle had been influenced by the doctrine of nationalisme intégral which was based on the defence of French sovereignty, but also by Maurras’ foreign policy ideas of an independent France leading the small nations against the empires. Moreover, de Gaulle still resented the American attempt to place France under the Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories (AMGOT) system in 1944.

The means to achieve the grand strategic objective was to claim vocally France’s ‘autonomy’ on every single occasion, and give his country the capabilities to implement and defend this autonomy. The means (autonomy) is often confused with the end (grand strategy) in the assessment of de Gaulle’s foreign policy, as the former is more visible (and easily criticised) than the latter. Yet, distinguishing both is analytically useful: ‘autonomy’ was never an objective per se, it was a means to accomplish a foreign policy aimed at overcoming the bipolarity of the Cold War, and the somehow mechanical polarization of alliances that came with it. This foreign objective was, with some minor adjustments, adopted by de Gaulle’s successors during the Cold War. As such, the French exceptionalism can be understood as the combination of an ambitious grand strategy and the means to implement it through a policy of autonomy.

One of the important means at de Gaulle and his successors’ disposal, in order to achieve their foreign policy objective, was the development of an independent French nuclear deterrent capability. Marked by the outcome of the Suez crisis, in which France and the UK were coerced to leave Egypt by

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the USSR and the US, de Gaulle accelerated the nuclear programme initiated by the Fourth Republic with the aim of guaranteeing France’s freedom of maneuver in relation to the two superpowers. This period was marked by an intense debate in France regarding the proper nuclear strategy to adopt, which opposed the ‘atlanticists’ and the ‘sovereignists’. The first group, led by Raymond Aron and General Beaufre, contended that the French nuclear deterrent should be aimed at reinforcing the American deterrence capabilities, similarly to the British model. While France could be in competition with some allies on a number of issues, competition should not be confused with hostility: the enemy was to the East. The second group, which comprised famous officers such as Generals Gallois and Poirier, advocated that the French nuclear deterrent should not be targeted at any enemy in particular: deterrence cannot be shared, so there should be no reason to subordinate the French capability to the American one. Because this strategic conception dovetailed neatly with de Gaulle’s foreign policy objective, it eventually won the strategic debate and was adopted as the French nuclear strategy. Furthermore, this nuclearization of French defence policy also had a consequence on the political regime itself by cementing the role of the French president. Because he commands the nuclear forces, the French president is, literally, the embodiment of French deterrence, which further reinforces the presidential nature of the Fifth Republic. It is no surprise that the French regime has been called a ‘nuclear monarchy’.

Another way to implement the goal of autonomy was to withdraw the French armed forces from NATO’s integrated command structure in 1966. This decision was the culmination of a gradual French disaffection towards NATO, and in particular the Anglo-American primacy in the alliance. Of course, the French armed forces were never entirely disconnected from NATO’s defence planning process during the Cold War, as Memoranda of Understanding were agreed upon between French head of staffs and SACEURs. However, this situation had two consequences. First, during the Cold War, the French armed forces were never as integrated as their European counterparts in terms of procedures or equipment. Therefore, the French armed forces lacked sufficient knowledge about the proper NATO

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procedures, which had consequences during the NATO-led operations to which France participated, including Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Even after France had reintegrated the military structure, such a lack of knowledge played out during the Libyan intervention: several policymakers expressed their frustration for not having been able to sufficiently shape the conduct of the campaign, due to a relative lack of understanding of the importance of specific positions within the NATO structure. In particular, French officials complained about their lack of influence on the targeting process, due to their relative absence from the Joint Targeting Board but also lamented the fact that they had to convince NATO of the need to have the French helicopter pilots deciding which targets to attack. Therefore, the auto-exclusion of the French armed forces from NATO procedures created an integration gap that is still being filled today. Second, this desire to maintain a French strategic autonomy was also exerted in the former French colonies, with a number of interventions in sub-Saharan Africa (but also Lebanon) during the Cold War. This policy created a two-tier army: an army designed for high-intensity warfare against the Soviet Union, which was never used, and an army designed for quick interventions in Africa built on elite light infantry forces such as the paratroopers and the Foreign Legion. These dual armed forces proved their limitation during the Gulf War, as France struggled to mobilize and deploy 15,000 troops, which were deemed too lightly equipped by the American planners: the French tradition of agility and quick reaction, acquired through several military interventions, lacked sufficient armour to participate in General Schwartzkopf’s manoeuvre. To an important degree, the French ‘way of warfare’ during the Cold War was somehow marginalized, with part of the army designed to fight the Soviet Union incompletely integrated with other NATO armies; and another part specializing in light interventions but lacking experience with high intensity operations.

As explained above, the French strategic debate has historically been split between ‘atlanticists’ and ‘sovereignists’, with the latter group gaining primacy through the primary importance acquired by the nuclear deterrence capability within the French armed forces, and maintaining this position during the Cold War. However, the former group, which considered that France was an integral member of the Atlantic family, never really disappeared, although it was definitely less important in the French decision-making process and less active in the production of a strategic literature. Yet, this dichotomy was also rhetorically manipulated in order to favour the

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sovereignists’ political preferences. As such, ‘atlanticist’ became an insult in the French political debate, with self-proclaimed heirs to the Gaullist legacy trying to block any political-diplomatic evolution that would seem to threaten France’s sovereignty. Therefore, this inflammatory rhetoric about the ‘sovereignty’ (and associated terms such as ‘independence’, or ‘autonomy’) went beyond what France was actually doing, and overlooked the actual steps Paris took towards the allies during the Cold War. Moreover, this also gave the impression to foreign non-specialist observers that France was always more a problem than a reliable partner in the transatlantic security architecture.\(^{25}\) This is not to underplay the fact that France was, indeed, something of an outsider during the Cold War. But there is the risk of focusing too much on the rhetoric of ‘sovereignty’, thus overlooking both the foreign policy objectives this independence was designed to serve, and the cooperation France achieved with her allies.

Ultimately, France was quite comfortable with the bipolar world, as the opposition between the US and the USSR meant that there was room for an ambitious actor to try to find a third way beyond the bipolarization of the international system. It also meant that France could develop genuinely autonomous ways to act abroad, in particular through military interventions in former colonies and the acquisition of nuclear capabilities. This allowed France to keep behaving as a great power, by adopting practices (in particular nuclear practices) similar to those of the major powers,\(^{26}\) thus mitigating the objective loss of geopolitical importance that France suffered after the Second World War.\(^{27}\) Yet, this situation would change with the end of the Cold War and the apparition of the unipolar world: French exceptionalism would have to reinvent itself.

**French Exceptionalism after the Cold War**

The transformation of the international system that followed the end of the Cold War put French foreign and security policy under pressure. The French exceptionalism was based on the willingness to find a ‘third way’ between the two blocs. With the rise of unipolarity,\(^{28}\) this fundamental premise disappeared. Therefore, a progressive gap was created between France’s foreign policy objectives, which had to be redefined, and the rhetoric and

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\(^{27}\)Olivier Schmitt, ‘Decline in Denial. France since 1945’ in Frédéric Mérand (ed.), *Coping with Geopolitical Decline* (forthcoming).

practice of independence, which was still implemented by French decision-makers out of habit and experience. Unsurprisingly, French policy-makers were uncomfortable with the new international order, complaining of the ‘hyperpower’ of the United States, and calling on multiple occasions for the emergence of a ‘multipolar world’. In their mind, this meant that Europe would become more independent from the United States, in effect a simple update of the autonomy objective inherited from the Cold War, without realizing that a ‘multipolar world’ could mean that actors such as Russia or China may want to challenge the international order. In other words, French decision-makers simply updated the rhetorical means to achieve France’s Cold War foreign policy objective (adding ‘multipolarity’ to the traditional call for independence), which prevented the emergence of deep thinking about the transformation of the international system and the consequences for French foreign policy. In short, after the Cold War, France confused the means with the ends, and was subjugated by the former without re-thinking the core assumptions of the latter.

Yet, much had to be done. The unipolar world order meant that in one way or another, France had to reinvent its relationship with the United States, as it could not manoeuver between two blocs of equivalent power any longer. It also meant that France’s relationship with NATO had to be reconsidered, taking into account the alliance’s new roles after the Cold War. Characteristically, important parts of the French strategic community pushed for the dissolution of NATO after 1991 and immediately saw the USA as a new ‘Empire’ (heir to the old arch-enemy that was the Holy Roman Empire) which had to be tamed. As such, authors reactivated the old Gaullist distinction between the Atlantic Alliance (which could be maintained), and NATO as an organization (which could disappear in order to leave room for a European defence). For more than a decade, French policy-makers hoped for the establishment of a ‘European defence’ which would, depending on the moment, be a European pillar within NATO or a fully autonomous capacity that would make NATO obsolete. It is only recently that France acknowledged that ‘European Defence’ as initially

conceived was more an ideal than an achievable goal, and that smaller steps had to be envisioned instead.\(^{34}\)

Also, with multinational interventions becoming the new trend for Western states through a combination of normative pressures towards multilateralism and budgetary constraints,\(^{35}\) the French armed forces had to learn how to cooperate with their partners, which highlighted the differences in strategic cultures,\(^{36}\) the possibility of reform,\(^{37}\) but also the potential for convergence with the armed forces of like-minded countries.\(^{38}\) The nuclear order was also challenged, with new actors threatening traditional deterrence from the outside (by developing new capabilities including nuclear capabilities in some cases), or from below (by conducting actions below the threshold of triggering nuclear reactions).\(^{39}\) Yet, despite the amplitude of the transformation of the international system, the seduction of ‘autonomy’ as an objective per se means that any change in the French security policy is judged according to the threshold of a romanticized Gaullism, which serves as a rhetorical resource to shame policies actors disagree with. This exercise is evenly spread on all sides of the political spectrum, thus validating de Gaulle’s ironic formulation when he forecast that his legacy would be disputed by all political groups: ‘everyone has been, is, or will be a Gaullist’. Currently, the new trend in French circles is to call Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande’s foreign policies ‘neo-conservative’ (in opposition to the ‘Gaullo-Mitterandists’) because of their alleged militarism, although French military interventions abroad are numerically on decline compared with François Mitterrand or Jacques Chirac’s terms in office.

Yet, a growing gap between the practice and the rhetoric of French security policy is observable, which leads observers to question the effectiveness of French diplomacy.\(^{40}\) The constant reference to the French Cold War foreign and security policy, and subsequent shaming of any departure from it, is easily


\(^{39}\)Thérèse Delpech, Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century. Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation 2012).

\(^{40}\)Frédéric Charillon, La France peut-elle encore Agir sur le Monde? (Paris: Armand Colin 2010).
explainable by the absence of a new transpartisan grand narrative relevant for the contemporary international system, but overlooks the actual security policy changes France went through since the end of the Cold War and which are covered in this special issue. The first two articles explore France’s integration within the transatlantic security landscape. Alice Pannier argues that Paris’ relation with London and Washington has been profoundly transformed since the end of the Cold War, with France embracing in practice, if not in rhetoric, its integration within the western ‘family’. Stephanie Hofmann shows that the ‘Gaullist consensus’ on NATO was not as widely shared as commonly thought and that party preferences matter in order to understand France’s NATO policy, thus adding a welcome degree of granularity in the study of this troubled relationship. The second pair of articles explores core issues of sovereignty: nuclear strategy and intelligence. Nicolas Giacometti shows that the French, British and American nuclear doctrines have actually converged and that the differences are much less acute than during the Cold War. Olivier Chopin links the evolution of the French intelligence laws with a radical transformation of the nature of the French polity, which is gradually moving from a centralized state-based system to a more traditional liberal model. This deep transformation of the French state explains a gradually evolving relationship with the way intelligence is conceived in the decision-making process, and thus the organization of intelligence agencies. Finally, the last two articles look at France at war, in order to dispel a number of common myths. Elie Tenenbaum shows that the development of a counter-insurgency doctrine in France, the UK and the US has very much been the result of a transatlantic circulation of knowledge since the end of the Second World War, and that the COIN communities of the three countries have always been integrated. Olivier Schmitt introduces the concept of ‘selective emulation’ in order to explain the French military change in Afghanistan, in particular through the observation of allies’ best practices.

Overall, the contributions to this special issue shed a new light on France’s security policies, as they provide empirical analyses of France’s security practices without taking for granted the self-referential discourse of ‘exceptionality’ that too often serves as the starting point for analysis. It is time for such a dispassionate assessment, which shall be beneficial for France and her allies alike. Reluctant as she can sometimes be, France is an active member of the transatlantic security family.

Notes on contributor

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