

Evolving French Perceptions of Transatlantic Relations*

Ever since the first attempts to organize a European community in the early 1950s, France has been the most consistent and persistent of all European countries in seeking to advance its view of transatlantic relations. French governments of all political persuasions have seen the transatlantic partnership as excessively dominated by the United States and have sought to compensate by strengthening--under one model or another--the European component of that partnership. From the late 17th century until 1940, France was one of the world's major powers--at the very least a pares inter pares. It was, therefore, not easy to get used to military and economic dependence on (and the consequent political subordination to) the United States. From the perspective of all postwar French governments, American "hegemony" has been the problem, and a "partnership among equals" has been the goal.

To say that the French have been consistent in their perspectives on transatlantic relations is not to say their vision of Europe has been without variations. In the 1950s, French leaders like Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman imagined a sort of federal "United States of Europe;" in the 1960s Charles de Gaulle rejected this in favor of a confederal "Europe of States;" and in the 1970s and 1980s Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and François Mitterrand pursued a blend of the two, with Mitterrand

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often adopting the rhetoric of the federalists and the policies of de Gaulle. In any case, the common thread was that Europe--in whatever form--should be strong enough to stand up to the United States and prevent domination from Washington.

Nor is this thesis of continuity and clarity meant to suggest that French policies were without contradiction. Indeed, experience suggests that both the Gaullist vision of a "Europe of States" and the Mitterrandist vision of a "United States of Europe" were incapable of achieving their common goal of a European Community that could be America's equal. De Gaulle's nationalist Europe could never have sufficiently organized Europe's collective strength and it exaggerated the Europeans' desire for autonomy, and while Mitterrand's federalist Europe overestimated Europe's willingness to accept integration at the same time that it pretended France itself was ready for it.

The new French government of Edouard Balladur seems prepared to take a more pragmatic line on both the questions "What sort of Europe?" and "What relations with the United States?" This middle ground between federalism and nationalism on the one side and between partnership and hegemony on the other presents the prospects for the most cooperative relationship between France and the United States--and consequently between the EC and the United States--for many years. There are significant risks, however, that this long-term trend toward a more constructive relationship may be spoiled by short-term electoral pressures, by the structural relationship between a France and an America both

with lofty national ambitions, and more specifically, by a dispute over transatlantic trade which may come to be seen as a litmus test for the whole new arrangement.

The Socialists' Vision of Transatlantic Relations, 1989-93

In the wake of the geopolitical revolutions of 1989-1991--the end of the Cold War, German unification and the dissolution of the Soviet Union--France had the opportunity to make major revisions in its perspective of European and transatlantic relations. In Europe, France could plausibly have argued that the opening up of the east made a broadening of the Community inevitable and that deeper EC integration was not only no longer possible but perhaps, because of the possibility of German domination, not even desirable. On the transatlantic question, France might have argued that the American hegemony they feared for so long would naturally disappear with the Cold War over and that the problem would be more an isolationist America than a dominant one. Paris would be able to achieve a more balanced partnership with Washington under these circumstances, and it would need one in order to balance the Germans in Europe.

The Mitterrand administration, however, did not choose either of these paths. Instead, Mitterrand and the Socialists concluded that the revolutions of 1989-90 called for "more Europe," not less, and affirmed that this Europe could only be created if not in opposition to, at least clearly distinct from the United States. The French calls for a European "political

and monetary union" and a "European security identity" were nothing more than an accelerated version of the longstanding French approach to European construction and transatlantic relations: EC autonomy had to be pursued.

The main reason France insisted upon the accelerated unification of Europe was doubtless German unification. The new Germany would have a GDP 39 percent greater than France's and a population 41 percent greater. As the German Bundesbank de facto determined French monetary policy anyway, Mitterrand concluded that it was in France's interest to push for a European central bank over which French leaders would at least have some control. In the military domain, the French also feared the consequences of a Germany that would no longer be under the legal and historical constraints of the past and would no longer be so dependent on its allies for military support as during the Cold War. In the absence of a galvanizing Soviet threat, reasoned the Socialists, only a more integrated political union could keep the West Europeans from returning to the old national competitions which France, in a Europe of States stretching from the Atlantic to the Urals, might no longer be so well placed to win.

France did not take the rhetoric of political union to its logical conclusion and refused at Maastricht to accept the creation of a sovereign European parliament or federal decision-making in foreign and security policy. But the French did go further than ever before in this direction: They accepted German conditions for a European monetary union that would abolish the

franc by 1999 and began not only to discuss a European nuclear doctrine but actually to create a joint army corps with Germany, accepting for the first time since 1958 the principle of military integration and the permanent stationing of German soldiers (at the headquarters in Strasbourg) in France. If there was, thus, a contradiction between the rhetoric of political union and its actual results, the conception and trend was clear: the end of the Cold War and German unification called for a significant deepening of the European Community.

Like the push for "European Union," the diffident French approach to transatlantic relations also had several facets and explanations. First was a geopolitical argument: a European Union could only effectively be created under the coalescing power of an outside threat, and with the Soviet Union gone, American and Japan had to play the catalyzing role, at least in the economic domain. Second, Europe needed a union that would include autonomous military cooperation because the United States could not always be counted on to protect European interests or security. For the French, Yugoslavia was the perfect example of a case in which European interests might be threatened but from which the United States, preoccupied with domestic ills and without a geopolitical threat, would abstain. Europe needed its own abilities to deal with crisis that the Americans would be unwilling or unable to confront. Finally, the French desire for a more autonomous Europe after the Cold War had longstanding cultural and historical roots: the desire for prestige and rank.

As the Gulf War showed, a Europe unable to act militarily and autonomously would always be subordinate to the United States, and Washington, not Paris, would be the important actor on the world stage; France's global ambitions were greater than this, and only a strong Europe could provide a platform for realizing those ambitions.

By the beginning of 1993, the Socialists dual approach-- accelerated West European integration plus independence from the United States--appeared to be in serious trouble on both fronts. In Europe, the ratification process of the Maastricht Treaty took much longer than expected, was rejected by the Danes and delayed by the British, and in France itself only passed a September 1992 referendum by a minuscule 1%. Moreover, France's attempt to speed European "deepening" ahead before widening gradually became unrealistic, and Mitterrand's idea of a pan-European "confederation" was rejected by the East Europeans as a "waiting room" designed to keep them out of the Community. The French Socialists' vision of a functioning European political union with common foreign, security, and monetary policies by the end of the decade seems increasingly unlikely to take place along the lines foreseen.

The Socialists' efforts to create a European military identity distinct from the United States also seem to have lost momentum. Against active French opposition, NATO has moved ahead with reorganizations that include the development of a Rapid Reaction Corps, the creation of multinational corps, an expansion

of tasks to include peacekeeping and peacemaking, a geographical expansion outside the Alliance's normal "zone," and the opening up to former Warsaw Pact states in the form of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC). French efforts to strengthen the Western European Union have met with only limited success, and most of Europe has turned backed to NATO as the most effective security institution for Europe, most notably in Yugoslavia, where NATO has for the first time ever actually begun a military mission, ironically outside of its traditional "zone". For many Europeans--and an increasing number of French--the Gulf War, Yugoslavia, Somalia and other crises have demonstrated that Europe can not function in the area of international security without the United States. Mitterrand and his supporters could always answer that this was all the more reason to create Europe rather than to give up and turn to Washington. But whatever the long-term merits of that argument, the short-term realities seemed to argue for a more cooperative relationship with the United States. France's dual-track vision of a federal European union that would operate independently from the United States has had to be put on hold.

A New French Perspective on Transatlantic Relations

The French government of Edouard Balladur elected in March 1993 opens up the possibility of a significant change in the French conception of transatlantic relations. With the Socialists' project bogged down in difficulties, and as the new

geopolitical realities of Europe start to sink in, the new French government seems prepared to take advantage of an opportunity to set European-American relations on a new course and has come to power with an apparent determination to abandon many of the taboos of the past. Given the enduring French preoccupation with prestige and France's interest in a prominent world role, it would be unrealistic to assume a sea-change; the French are unlikely to abandon their preoccupation with European autonomy. But there are signs that a change in perspective has taken place.

The Balladur government is likely to distinguish itself from its predecessors where both European and transatlantic policy is concerned. First, the center-right's European policy is unlikely to be as focussed on integration as that which Mitterrand pursued between 1990 and 1993. While the government does include the strongly integrationist UDF (led by Giscard d'Estaing), it is dominated by a Gaullist party (RPR) which has always been more skeptical about European federalism and whose supporters voted at a ratio of nearly 2-1 against the Maastricht treaty in the referendum last year. Numerous RPR leaders support the rapid extension of EC membership (if not free trade) to the states of Central Europe and Balladur has gone so far as to call for an end to the "exclusive game" with Germany and better relations with Great Britain. The RPR believes that Germany cannot be "contained" with institutions but only through the "moral, political and economic redressment of France." The old

federalist dream of a "United States of Europe," according to Chirac adviser François Bujon d'Estang, "is no longer relevant."

It would be quite mistaken, however, to believe the RPR's victory in March--or even the large "no" vote in the Maastricht referendum--represents a French "rejection" of Europe as some observers have suggested or feared. All French parties except the extremist National Front and Communists fully accept the logic of European integration and the necessity of the Franco-German relationship at its center. Balladur's unambiguous commitment to further European unification can be seen in his nomination of pro-European Simone Veil as his most senior minister of state; his affirmation of the franc-DM parity and the policy of the franc fort; his exclusion of anti-Maastricht campaigner Philippe Séguin from the government and relegation of nationalist Charles Pasqua to the Interior Ministry (as opposed to defense); and his choice of Bonn for his first foreign working visit. There will no doubt be a change in the emphasis put on "integration" under the new French government, and it is true that the propitious environment of the Cold War for European integration is gone. But to conclude that the French will therefore turn away from European unification is to misunderstand France's need for and interest in the European Community.

The new French government's conception of transatlantic relations also differs from that of the Socialists. In the area of security relations, the center-right has sharply criticized Mitterrand for his "conservative" NATO policies and has promised

a more forthcoming approach. Jacques Chirac argues that "integration with 70,000 Americans will not have the same meaning as integration with 300,000; party defense expert François Fillon calls for a "recasting of the Gaullist model for defense"; RPR deputy Jacques Baumel denounces France's "outmoded attitude toward NATO"; and Chirac adviser Pierre Lellouche suggests there should be "no taboos" in the French relationship with the United States. Old fears of American domination seem to be fading as the United States turns its attention to its increasingly preoccupying social and economic problems. With America no longer appearing to be the bully depicted by de Gaulle, and with Europe's own ability to develop an effective military capability in doubt, the new French government seems more prepared than any since the 1950s to admit the need for close transatlantic security cooperation and for the United States in Europe.

France's views of transatlantic relations seem rather more traditional--that is to say adversarial--when it comes to trade. Here the image of America once again is as the global power that claims to promote free trade while it subsidizes its industries and that seeks to keep the European Community divided. For electoral as well as other reasons the RPR-UDF coalition ran its parliamentary campaign on a platform of firmness in transatlantic trade, and Chirac went so far as to denounce the January 1993 U.S.-EC agreement on agriculture "null and void." Thinking of the seven-year-prize of a French presidential election scheduled for 1995, Chirac has promised French farmers

that France is ready to face a transatlantic crisis if necessary in order to defend its interests.

There is still room for agreement in the French-U.S. agricultural row, and because both sides know the stakes--a failure to complete the Uruguay round, a spillover into security relations, and a Franco-German split--an agreement is likely to be reached. Given the disastrous state of the French Socialist party, perhaps Chirac will feel confident enough to accept the Washington accords and simply try to satisfy French farmers with financial compensation. In any case, the issue is worth mentioning here because it is an example of the short-term dispute that can easily have implications for France's view of transatlantic relations more generally, no matter what the long-term trends in French thinking are. If French politicians feel compelled (rightly or wrongly) to make America into a scapegoat--not altogether unlikely in difficult times and with elections around the corner--it is unlikely that a generally more positive French vision of transatlantic relations can endure.

Conclusion: Conceptualizing the French View

How, then, can one characterize the evolving French view of transatlantic relations? What concepts are most pertinent in analyzing the French view?

"Hegemony," the Gaullist concept of the 1960s, no longer seems appropriate at a time when the United States seems resolved

to deal primarily with domestic issues and when its relative military and especially economic power vis à vis Europe have declined. De Gaulle sometimes exaggerated America's omnipotence and influence in order to justify his own ambitions. But surely, the United States of the early 1960s--when the European Community was still embryonic, limited to the economic sphere, and highly dependent on Washington for military protection--had a lot more leverage over European affairs than it does today. With the EC's single market bigger than America's, the Soviet threat gone, American troops withdrawing from Europe and American priorities at home, the age of American hegemony in Europe is certainly gone.

At the same time, the Mitterrandist concept of a "partnership among equals" also seems inappropriate--the United States and the European Community are not equals. For all its progress toward integration and cooperation, the Community is not unified in the same way as the United States and indeed, with its myriad of cultures, histories and languages, cannot be. The French Socialists' idea of a transatlantic partnership founded on two equal pillars does not correspond to the reality of transatlantic relations (not the least because of those same French Socialists unwillingness to accept the true "United States of Europe" they talked about). Especially in the military domain, Europe will need the United States more than the United States will need Europe for the foreseeable future.

In the complex world of the 1990s and 21st century, the reality of transatlantic relations thus defies any simple conceptualization. The notion of hegemony seems outdated and the notion of equal partnership is unrealistic. The reality of the transatlantic relationship today is a Europe whose individual states still exist but which cooperate closely on all aspect of policy and a United States no longer dominant in European affairs but indispensable as a trading and military partner. The new government in France seems to understand this more complicated, but perhaps more realistic, assessment. Whether it can avoid the temptations of a more simplistic view, however, is not clear.