

The Specter of Unilateralism

Many Americans, indeed many Westerners, believe that the French are anti-American by nature. No one in Washington would be surprised if a top-secret document, leaked from the Quai d'Orsay, revealed that French leaders spend their spare time thinking of ways to tweak the beak of the U.S. eagle. The myth of maverick France, personified by the larger-than-life figure of General Charles de Gaulle, is profoundly anchored in the collective imagination. Myths die hard. Nobody seems to notice that de Gaulle has been dead for more than 30 years and that the Franco–U.S. relationship has moved on.

Today, French opinion on how to approach the United States is far more nuanced. One can speak roughly of three main strands of French opinion. Some very influential French leaders and experts are aligned along two diametrically opposed, or polarized, attitudes, one supporting and one opposing the United States; between these, however, is the majority “moderate” attitude, which is what has made the Western alliance possible.

At one end of the polarized attitudes, some French support unflinching solidarity that at times even shades into docility. Those who possess this attitude argue that the United States should not be hindered in discharging its global responsibility as the champion of democracy and security manager of the world. From this point of view, France should work toward supporting policies that benefit the Western community as a whole. National and personal interests must be set aside for the general interest. Some French strategic experts have built careers on being sharply critical of French policies that stray from the narrow paths defined by Washington, because a French expert who castigates the archaic ways of France will easily find a chorus of approval from across the Atlantic.

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It seems as if the United States confuses its national interest with a global interest.

Opposing this polarized view is another, equally polarized viewpoint, in which everything the United States does is bad, or even malevolent, and every tragic event on the international scale is directly or indirectly a U.S. responsibility. These two extreme viewpoints are influential, but they are definitely in the minority. For most French—leaders, pundits, and ordinary citizens alike—France and the United States are ancient allies. The French have never forgotten the gratitude owed to the United States for its help in

smashing the yoke of nazism and escaping the chains of communism. This majority viewpoint has sustained France as one of the most redoubtable allies of the United States during the defining crises of the Cold War, such as the Euro-missile crisis.

This attitude, however, does not translate into vassalage. Although France shares nearly all of the international objectives of the United States, the French definitely wish to preserve their right to differ on how these objectives should be

achieved. Iraq epitomizes this desire of independence. The current difference in the attitudes of Paris and Washington should not belie the fact that both countries share the same final objective: to reintegrate Iraq into the community of nations as a democratic and peace-loving society. Ideally, realization of this goal would entail the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

France participated energetically in the Persian Gulf War and in the sanctions regime against Iraq. Over the course of the last ten years, however, a rift has opened between the perceptions, not of Paris and Washington, but rather of Europeans on one side and the United States and Great Britain on the other. France, with Europe, believes that maintaining the current policy of embargoes and selective strikes has failed to weaken Hussein. Instead, the population has suffered, the country is devastated, and the dictator remains in power. From this perspective, the time to search for alternative solutions had come.

Washington, meanwhile, sees France as the chief culprit behind a premature move to end the sanctions regime and responds by accusing Paris of sacrificing the coalition's strategic interests for the sake of making a few francs. This jockeying between Paris and Washington is based more on a difference of tactics than of strategy and is more prominent in bilateral relations than it should be, thanks to the not-inconsiderable narcissism of both capitals, driven by an unshakeable belief in their mission to civilize the world.

The United States needs to be reassured that the French are keenly aware that an order of magnitude separates the realpolitik prospects of both countries. Only a U.S. president could claim, as Bill Clinton did, that the United States remains the world's only "indispensable nation." No doubt it is. Any belief that France could or would compete with the United States in terms of power would not only be illusory, but ridiculous. Competition as equals is out of the question.

Making a Virtue Out of Necessity

Equality, in any case, is not what France seeks. Indeed, France coined the concept of the United States as a "hyperpower." When Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine first used this neologism to qualify the new reality of U.S. power, he was sharply criticized both in France—where acknowledging U.S. supremacy is not politically correct—and in the United States—where the term "hyper" carries a negative connotation.

Védrine did not intend to pass judgment on U.S. power in his statement. He simply made an objective observation, reflecting a pragmatic attitude that acknowledges U.S. supremacy as a matter of course while trying to preserve some maneuvering room for France. France today is powerful enough to have worldwide interests, but not so powerful as to pursue its interests in an imperial fashion. Supporting this idea is the view that the collapse of the Soviet Union affords France the possibility to carve out a comfortable political niche: the role of the recalcitrant-but-indispensable ally that deals with the hard-to-handle sticky stuff that ultimately holds the Atlantic alliance together. Chance and necessity thus combine to produce equilibrium in France's foreign policy. Simply put, Paris makes a virtue out of necessity by insisting that Washington heed the opinions (or at least the existence) of other nations.

The dynamism of the U.S. economy during the 1990s has served as the driving force of world economic growth. The United States has indeed placed its power in the service of advancing and supporting democracy, toward a world of respect for all peoples and of collective security. The United States is indeed generally perceived as a champion of the universal values of peace, progress, and human dignity. The French, with other Europeans, share these same values and admire U.S. dynamism, diversity, ease of integration, and mobility.

This admiration is not universal. U.S. unipolarity and unilateral impulses are directly connected to the rift between the perceptions of Europeans and Americans. Europeans harbor deep doubts regarding certain aspects of U.S. society, such as the easy availability of firearms, the death penalty, the influ-

ence of money on the electoral process, social inequalities that are not only growing but accepted, the situation of African Americans, and the excessive commercialization of culture.

More to the point, on the international level, many Europeans deplore what the United States sometimes does with its supremacy. Perceptions prevail that the United States is increasingly tempted to pursue unilaterally defined policies with little regard for the interests and viewpoints of other nations, as if the United States confuses its national interest with a global interest. When once the saying was, "What is good for General Motors is good for the United States," now people in Washington are apparently saying, "What is good for the United States is good for the world." From this point of view, even if Washington's proclamations that U.S. power is beneficial to people everywhere are true, the self-glorification that seems customary to U.S. leaders (from "Manifest Destiny" to the "only indispensable nation") understandably does not cross the Atlantic well.

It's Unilateralism, Not Isolationism

The specter of U.S. isolationism, which haunted Western Europeans during the Cold War, has been replaced by the specter of U.S. unilateralism. Europeans are keenly sensitive to any sign that the United States intends to stray from the rules of multilaterally defined law, conceive a disaffection for international organizations, favor coercive practices, or in short, raise arguments that international rules place an unwarranted constraint on the freedom of the United States to act.

The United States would be wrong to think this sensitivity is uniquely French. It is, in fact, widely echoed elsewhere in Europe (even in Great Britain), whether by political leaders or the general population. In the long term, the most evident risk is that unilateralism will provide the fuel for anti-U.S. sentiment. This shift may already be happening among the younger generations, especially among university students (who nevertheless continue to attend U.S. universities).

Among the notable unilateral U.S. policies that particularly offend Europeans and the French are

- failing to sign the treaty banning antipersonnel mines;
- refusing to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty;
- abrogating agreements on global warming regulations as defined in the Kyoto Protocol;
- bombing Iraq (with the British) and continuing the sanctions regime that chiefly harms the Iraqi general population, not Saddam Hussein;

- neglecting to acknowledge problems associated with North–South economic and developmental disparities;
- grudging willingness to assist in strengthening and legitimizing multilateral organizations, notably the United Nations (UN);
- tending to support Israel to the point where, in European public opinion, Israel appears more and more as the aggressor and the Palestinians as the victims; and
- seeking “defense” or “protection,” which is defined in national terms, over “prevention,” which is defined multilaterally.

Insofar as security policy is concerned, the United States and France view the problem of how to protect national territory from military threats quite differently. Generally speaking, from the French (and European) perspective, the main national security challenges presently come from collapsed states and zones of anarchy. In matters of security, the United States favors a coercive approach, including the U.S. tendency to confuse briefings for consultations.

Two Tests Ahead

Two strategic issues have revived the debate over the nature of the transatlantic alliance: the U.S. national missile defense (NMD) program and the effort to define a common European security and defense policy. By and large, the U.S. strategic rationale for NMD eludes Europeans. No one in Europe truly believes that North Korea is a military threat to the United States. No one doubts that the United States, which accounts for one-third of worldwide military expenditures, could deter a rogue nation. French and European leaders fear that the concept of NMD will revive the arms race, especially in Asia. Many believe this negative effect could precede the hypothetical deployment of NMD. When all is said and done, NMD, as the name suggests, is about a U.S. national plan; all protests to the contrary, the Europeans fully understand that they cannot prevent it. Washington should never forget—even once European governments stop publicly criticizing the NMD program or perhaps endorse it—that European public opinion generally rejects NMD. NMD will surely tarnish the U.S. image in Europe and the rest of the world.

With regard to the question of European defense, just as Franco–German reconciliation has been the driving force for Europe’s economic reconstruction, it will provide the model for security structures. In the future, Paris and Berlin will be able to pursue a new model for cooperation, different from that of reconciliation between enemies: the successful “rebalancing” of

the power relationship between friendly countries. France and Germany will accept such a rebalancing because it is premised on the existence of an overarching common objective.

During the East–West conflict, an asymmetrical parity existed between the power of France and Germany. The strategic autonomy of France provided a counterweight to the economic power of Germany. France’s position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a nuclear-weapons

state was complimented by the economic supremacy of Germany, which had a strong currency, trade surplus, and robust economy. Bluntly, France had the bomb while Germany had the mark.

Today, due to the drive for European unification, the French are a little Germanized, and the Germans are a little Frenchified. With the agony of division in the past, Germany has felt a new sense of maturity and exercises real sovereignty. France, too, is surer of itself than a decade ago, no longer approaching economic

unification with Germany with the reflex of fear or mistrust. Symbolically and substantively, the euro has put an end to the franc/mark disparity and all its vexing technical and political issues. Americans should also come to terms with the need to rebalance their relationship with a Europe that can assume a larger strategic responsibility, now that it too is free from the burden of division.

In theory, the United States welcomes a European defense identity. In practice, however, the United States has a natural tendency to consider the relationship between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European defense policy as a zero-sum game, fearing that any European move would detract from the cohesion of the alliance. The United States does not openly acknowledge that, to them, cohesion means “one, and only one, center of decision.” Thus, quite a large gap exists between theory and practice. The closer we get to implementation of a Euro-defense, the stronger the misgivings of the United States. Just as de Gaulle was once famous for saying “non” to Washington, Washington has essentially defined three “non’s” that, in its view, should shape this major step in European integration: nondoubling of Europe from NATO, nonduplication of forces, and nondiscrimination against NATO countries that are not members of the European Union (EU).

A considerable contradiction thus arises. How can there be an egalitarian relationship if one party alone determines the nonnegotiable points of compatibility and incompatibility? Can the European Pillar of Defense have any

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meaning at all if its perimeter is strictly defined by Washington?

The Europeans need to convince the United States that the emergence of a European identity for defense and security is not contrary, and can even be helpful, to U.S. interests. By the same token, the United States can take into account the wishes of their European partners. Fortunately, this path has a precedent. Despite its military preeminence during the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, the United States accepted joint management of the conflict with the Europeans. This decision was not a military, but rather a political, necessity. Unilateral U.S. action in the region would have damaged the cohesion of the alliance and would not have allowed the United States the luxury it now enjoys of supplying only 20 percent of the Kosovo peacekeeping force.

The danger is that the United States will take the opposite view: that the emergence of an increasingly autonomous Europe means that the Western alliance will be rent by an ever-widening flaw. In this view, global disorder must be treated from a global perspective that only the United States can have; the EU, at best, can play only a secondary role to U.S. leadership. From this perspective, the most important thing is to strengthen the solidarity of the NATO alliance, as the plan for European defense autonomy entails an unacceptably high risk of decoupling or duplication of forces.

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One could draw a parallel to the political dilemma that arrived with the French nuclear capability. At first vehemently opposed by the United States, one of the main arguments against French nuclear autonomy concerned the risk of duplication; after all, France's limited nuclear arsenal would provide only a marginal supplement to the overall nuclear capacity of the Atlantic alliance. Once the French *force de frappe* became a reality, however, the United States was obliged to accept it. Washington eventually made a virtue out of necessity—by acknowledging in the Ottawa Declaration of 1974 that France's nuclear capability was in fact useful for the defense of the West and for greater European security.

We should thus hope that the same recognition holds true for Europe today. The United States will no doubt do whatever it can to prevent actual defense autonomy from occurring, but that if Europe forges ahead, Washington will get used to it and will discover its value for the defense of the West.

As Kosovo exemplifies, unilateralism is certainly not the only way Americans can do business. On the contrary, the United States realized that it was better able to achieve its goal by playing the game of coalitions and compromise. In the long term, Europe's emergence in a well-balanced partnership with the United States can be in the U.S. interest, for the United States on its own will doubtfully be able to remain the world's security manager for

long. After World War II, the leaders of France had the wisdom to reach out to the rising power of postwar Germany (with the delicate rebalancing act this action implied), no less for the sake of France than for the European values in which they believed. Similarly, today, the United States should have the wisdom to reach out to Europe, for its own good and for the sake of universal values.