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U.S.-French Crises in Historical Perspective: An Aronian View

Jean-Claude Casanova, *Commentaire*

Raymond Aron was much admired in the United States. Aron's critical distancing of himself from de Gaulle, probably contributed to his popularity in the United States. But it would be an insult to the Americans to think that their admiration for him was solely because he incarnated a position that could be described, at the risk of oversimplification, as more "Atlanticist", more pro-American, than that of most French leaders or observers. At a more profound level, Americans of his day appreciated Aron as the most lucid observer of French policy, because he was not only a specialist on France, but a great historian of the 20th century, with all its tragedies and complexity.

I have chosen to describe French-American crises as Aron saw them and on how one should interpret the present crisis, in an attempt to understand what can be considered as permanent and what can be seen as changeable in the present Franco-American misunderstanding or in the tensions between our two countries.

Aron made two enduring observations on French policy that are relevant to Franco-American crises, past and present. The first observation relates to the *temperament* of France, stemming from its history and place in the world; the second to the *ambiguity* of French policy that often results from this temperament.

On temperament, Aron described on September 24, 1952, a view he was to repeat often:

> The policy of a country like France, of medium size on the scale of the 20th century, often consists of adjusting to situations that are easier to curse than to modify. Obliged to submit when we would prefer to decide, we simultaneously express and vent our ill humor through interminable discussions of decisions that, for the most part, are imposed by the circumstances. Controversy over the Atlantic Pact or neutralism mainly reveals repressed feelings. Too much fighting against necessity ends with opinion failing to understand the degree of liberty that is left to us.

On ambiguity, Aron wrote on May 18, 1966:

> The real reason for the [NATO] crisis, or rather for its impassioned violence, nevertheless lies outside the boundary of good (or bad) diplomatic manners,

> beyond myth and language. Let us be frank about this: those whom General de Gaulle drives mad are not, like Jupiter's victims, those he wants to destroy but those he is obliged to live with. He inspires in them mixed feelings of admiration, astonishment, respect and exasperation, by means of a technique whose underlying principle is always the same: no one knows where he is trying to end up and everyone is left wondering, because he leaves it to be understood that he is pursuing a vast enterprise.

In light of these of observations and in an attempt to find common or distinguishing elements, let us look more closely at two crises in Franco-American relations: that of NATO in 1966 and that of Iraq in 2003.

Charles de Gaulle and the Atlantic Crisis

General de Gaulle's 1966 dispute with NATO did not break up the Atlantic alliance, but merely unsettled it. Fundamentally, de Gaulle initiated the dispute because he was reasoning in terms of traditional policy. The longstanding French policy of *dividing* Germany that he wanted to pursue failed in 1945. Neither the Russians nor the Americans nor the British nor—naturally—the Germans wanted it. If the goal of a Franco-Russian alliance to divide and weaken Germany became a pipedream in the 1940s, de Gaulle's dream in the 1960s consisted of *settling the German question among Europeans only, without the Americans*.

Hence, the idea, as de Gaulle put forward to Brezhnev in June 1966 to "remove the German problem from the area of dispute between the Soviet Union and the United States and place it where it belongs, namely as a problem to be settled in good faith among Europeans." It was no longer a question, as in the Atlanticist mantra, of anchoring Germany to the West in order to show unity to the Soviet Union. De Gaulle in fact resented what he called Germany's submission to the United States. He wanted "an independent European policy" and to this end he played off the Soviet Union and the United States. He used one to protect himself against the other, hoping that one day European independence would emerge from an American withdrawal from Germany and that a U.S.-Russian agreement over Europe would emerge in exchange for this withdrawal.

The problem was that this second French policy towards Germany was just as wild a pipedream as the first. The Russians held on to what they had because they were Communists first and Russians second. For them, French policy became an instrument in their strategy towards Germany and the United States. Obviously, this policy, as Aron noted on May 18, 1966, "has not contributed to European independence and unity. On the contrary it has forced the other Old World countries to try to outdo each other in Atlanticism."

In the end, it was history that decided. Germany was reunified and Eastern Europe liberated. De Gaulle sincerely wanted this outcome, but it was achieved by a policy that was the reverse of the one he advocated: through the maintenance and even the strengthening of an American presence in Europe that hastened the political and ideological collapse of the Soviet Union. This clearly shows that the key was not dividing up Europe between traditional nation-states, but between totalitarianism and western democracy, strengthened and sheltered by American might.

Jacques Chirac and the Iraq crisis

The war in Iraq has opened a breach between the United States and France. Certainly, the new American policy has its origins in 9/11, in the exceptional military strength at the disposal of the United States and in the situation in the Middle East. Because the Americans have considered themselves—and have become—indifferent to the Atlantic Alliance and suspicious of Europe, they preferred to act unilaterally, prepared if necessary to constitute the coalition needed for the mission they set themselves. Above all, they acted without the backing of the UN Security Council.

It is possible to identify the first stirrings of this new policy before 9/11 and even before the first Bush administration. Once the Soviet Union had disappeared and the U.S. had achieved its mastery of the revolution in military affairs, America's world role increased to the point where American power and determination became mutually reinforcing. After 9/11, a new doctrine was created and a new policy applied with the Middle East as its principal arena. But it is exactly in this part of the world that France, since de Gaulle, believes it has a special role.

Since General de Gaulle France has preferred to be in opposition for the sake of its own aggrandizement. The vestiges of Gaullism and of de Gaulle's Arab policy, the American decision to ignore the United Nations, and the American desire for unilateral decision-making ruled out any possibility that France might, like the United Kingdom, take the American side. The mechanisms of international diplomacy and the heightened rhetoric of French public statements meant that France went beyond mere abstention, showing open opposition and thus increasing the political cost of the operation to the United States. This explains the vehemence of reactions on both sides and justifies talk of a genuine crisis, the most serious since the 1960s. This is especially true in that French opinion today is quite content to see the United States facing difficulties in Iraq—difficulties which in French eyes demonstrate the correctness of the position taken by France: avoid war; leave the Pandora's box unopened.

Paradoxically, the doctrinal positions have become reversed. France could have called for caution but in fact it invoked international law, whereas General de Gaulle was an advocate of national sovereignty in opposition to all forms of international law. Of those who dreamed of cooperation, he said*: "I know that some poor souls want to replace force by politics. No one has ever effectively made policy after having renounced being strong."* Nor was he any kinder towards the United Nations: "*we do not recognize it as having any right of arbitration or jurisdiction [...], no quality of being able to lay down the law and apply it*." Jacques Chirac, on the contrary, has been talking like President Wilson, and it is George W. Bush who has been talking like General de Gaulle.

French doctrine is the mirror image of that put forward by Washington. France takes the view that: only respect for the law gives force its legitimacy; the United Nations Security Council is the sole arbiter of law and force; there is no such thing as a "just war" unless it is approved by the Security Council.

This doctrine has one advantage and one disadvantage. The advantage is that, because of France's permanent seat on the Security Council and the veto right this confers, France should be able to participate in the control of force anywhere in the world. Just like the one-time belief in the equalizing power of the atom, it is now believed that the Security Council has an equalizing power that makes France the equal of the United States or China. The disadvantage is that this doctrine is questionable both in practice and in theory.

In practice, it is questionable because NATO (including France) has already intervened militarily in Serbia without the agreement of the Security Council, in order to avoid a Russian veto. If tomorrow China were to threaten Taiwan, it is American power that could save the island and its democratic regime and not the Security Council, because of the Chinese veto. If the Security Council cannot guarantee everywhere and at all times the rule of law, it is because of its composition and the way it operates. The fact that certain powers not all of which are democracies have a veto over any decision authorizing or defending the use of force opens up the possibility of arbitrariness that is quite the reverse of the rule of law.

Leaving the realm of ideas to return to reality, questions must be asked concerning the causes of American intervention elsewhere in the world. The United States has three preoccupations that are linked to three threats: terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and rogue regimes. These preoccupations are shared by the Europeans and by numerous countries throughout the world. The Americans also regard themselves as being in the front line, because they have been direct targets and because they have unequalled global influence. France and other European countries can deny neither the legitimacy of the objectives nor America's capacity to act. What they can call into question is the manner in which the United States acts. This is because one can be powerful and still fail to attain one's objectives–and in fact cause more harm than the evils one was seeking to prevent.

The principal reproach that France can address to American policy today no longer relates to the war in Iraq. The war has taken place and will be judged in the light of eventual consequences for stability in Iraq and in Palestine, for the containment of global terrorism, and for the spread of democracy in the Middle East. There is no reason why France should not welcome these developments and help the Americans to achieve them. If France has no other policy than to make soothing speeches regarding the Middle East, while at the same time secretly wanting the United States to fail in the hope of retrospectively justifying its behavior in the United Nations and its popularity in the Arab world, the only result will be a further worsening in its relations with America, even greater division of Europe, and despair on the part of those in the Arab world who genuinely aspire to peace and democracy.

To be truthful, I see only one way of attempting to reconcile France and the United States. I find this reconciliation in the works of Montesquieu, who inspired part of the American Constitution and of whom Aron claimed to be a faithful disciple. In his *The Spirit of the Laws*, he justified preventive war, but added:

> It is a conqueror's business to repair part of the mischief he has occasioned. The right, therefore, of conquest I define thus: a necessary, lawful, but unhappy power, which leaves the conqueror under a heavy obligation of repairing the injuries done to humanity.

American action in Iraq was imprudent, but it must not be allowed to end badly. By criticizing this action, France under Jacques Chirac has derived a certain prestige, but it has also created divisions within Europe and the Atlantic world. It is in everyone's interest to repair the damages caused by this imprudence and to eliminate these uncalled-for and unhelpful divisions.