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France and Europe: an ambivalent relationship

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France's relationship with Europe is paradoxical. On one hand, France has long been a strong supporter of the idea of a united Europe. Aristide Briand, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman were the founding fathers of European integration. This enthusiasm also stems from the intellectual, idealistic and universal dimensions of French philosophy. But France is also a country with a long history as a nation-state and an early experience with global power. Even when France's position within Europe was weakened during the 19th century as a result of the rising power of Germany, France was able to maintain its importance in the global arena. It found solace in its colonial adventures and by 1914 was the second largest colonial empire in the world. And even when the Cold War forced Europe to rely on the United States, France was quick to demonstrate its independence and weight during the presidency of Charles de Gaulle.

Since the break-up of the Soviet bloc and the reunification of Germany, France's place at the center of Europe has become threatened. France's reaction was to step up its attempts to bring about European integration, especially through promotion of the single currency. France decided also to help to create a political Europe ("Europe puissance") by promoting the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and by re-launching a common European security and defense policy (ESDP), together with the UK, at the 1998 St. Malo Summit.

Three lessons about France's approach to Europe derive from the past and apply to the present. First, the concept of Europe is popular in France and is perceived by many as a way of avoiding both the conflicts of European history and the problems of a balance of power in Europe.

Second, the French obsession with Germany has never waned. France partly wants Europe in order to lock in Germany, out of fear of German power. This was evident at the 2000 Nice Summit when France insisted on an equal voting weight with Germany in the Council of Ministers. The Franco-German dimension is central to the European project. Zbigniew

Brzezinski put it well: "France seeks reincarnation as Europe: Germany hopes for redemption through Europe."[1] The European Union is the product of this Franco-German interaction.

Third, France is trying to create a Europe that helps promote French interests (in, for example, the Common Agricultural Policy [CAP]) and that helps to preserve France's unique identity, while at the same time leaving ample room for maneuver. François Mitterrand said it expressively in 1986: "France's independence and European integration are complementary." In this sense, the promotion of European defense policy reflects a change in context. The transatlantic relationship is weakening as a result of the disappearance of the Soviet threat; the challenge is now to define a European capacity to act.

France and the European Constitution: "making Europe without unmaking France"

Given this ambivalence toward Europe, France reacted with some hesitation to the European Constitutional process that was begun by German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer's speech at Humboldt University in May 2000. President Jacques Chirac accepted the idea of a Constitution, but not of a European federation in his speech at the German Bundestag in June. Prime Minister Lionel Jospin waited a year to give his own vision of Europe and proposed to "make Europe without unmaking France." Both of them advocated creating a "federation of nation states," a concept invented by former European Commission President Jacques Delors.

The European Convention, made up of representatives from European governments and Parliaments and from the European institutions, was chaired by former French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and met from the beginning of 2002 to the middle of 2003. During the Convention, France had three major goals: it wanted to avoid a federalist Europe or parliamentary supremacy in the European Union; it rejected the separation of competencies between Europe and member states as an excuse for the re-nationalization of common policies such as the CAP; and it supported greater efficiency in decision making. The end of the French left-right political cohabitation in 2002 gave the French authorities the ability to act more proactively and led to numerous Franco-German initiatives during the Convention.

In the end, Franco-German compromises formed the main basis for the final deal on the draft European Constitution that was adopted by the European Council in June 2004.

- France supported, with Spain and the United Kingdom, the appointment of an individual as permanent President of the European Council. France convinced Germany to accept this reform, while France agreed to the German idea to let the European Parliament elect the President of the European Commission. After negotiations with the other member states, however, the method for selecting the

[1] Zbigniew Brezinzski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, (Basic Books, 1998), p. 61.

Commission President was not substantially altered in the final version of the Constitution (nomination by the European Council by qualified majority and subsequent approval by the European Parliament);

- For reasons of efficiency, France accepted the shift from the complicated Nice majority voting system to a double majority voting system (thus France accepted that it would no longer have the same voting weight as the more populous Germany) in the Council of Ministers;

- In foreign policy, France supported, with Germany, a European Minister of Foreign Affairs and accepted qualified majority voting for foreign policy issues, but with important exceptions (all questions having security and defense implications, which are in fact the core of foreign policy);

- In defense policy, France and Germany supported a variety of measures to strengthen the Union's capacity: a mutual defense clause, a solidarity clause in case of terrorist attacks and natural catastrophes, the concept of structured cooperation between more willing and more capable member States, and an autonomous European military planning capacity;

- French ideas for increased economic governance in the Eurozone and for a stronger EU social policy did not make much headway, partly because of German opposition;

- France generally accepted the extension of qualified majority voting and an increase in the European Parliament's powers over many issues of EU competence (in particular, judicial and police cooperation);

- Because of its secularist tradition, France firmly (and successfully) opposed any reference to Christianity or God in the text of the Constitution.

In sum, France has not become federalist. On the contrary, it has sought balanced compromises between the intergovernmental and the federal approaches—and has been able to find them with Germany. Still, the United Kingdom has blocked any progress in the areas of taxation, social and foreign policy. The re-ignition of the Franco-German engine with a possible "Franco-German union" project (mentioned by some French politicians including then Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin at the end of 2003) was also a reaction to the fears of a dilution of Europe and of American hegemony in the context of EU enlargement and the Iraqi crisis.

French Public Opinion and the Future of Greater Europe

The referendum held in France on the ratification of the Maastricht Treaty, in 1992, only barely passed (51.05% voted yes, 48.95% voted no). Since that time, French public opinion seems to have become more Euro-skeptical or at the very least more unsure about Europe.

A survey carried about by BVA, a French polling firm, in early October 2003 revealed these uncertainties. Seventy-two percent of the French were in favor of a European Constitution and 71% in favor of a European army. But 59% preferred a Europe of States, with priority given to national institutions while only 32% preferred the idea of a federal Europe with priority given to European institutions. The latest *Eurobarometer* figures (Spring 2004) paint a similar picture: 43% think France's membership of the European Union is a good thing (with 18% thinking the contrary), a slightly lower level of support than the EU-15 average (where 48% think EU membership is a good thing and 17 % do not). French public opinion is also skeptical about enlargement (37% for, 47% against), but curiously support has increased since the end of 2003 (when 34% were for, 55% were against). Germany has now replaced France as the country most hostile to EU enlargement.

The public's reservations about Europe have many sources. Some sections of the French public have always been unhappy about the idea of relinquishing power to Europe. Thus, an odd coalition of Gaullists and Communists in the French Parliament rejected the first effort at a European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), the European Defense Community (EDC) in 1954.

Today, enlargement generates fears of dilution of the "European project" and challenges the future financing of common policies (such as the CAP). There is also concern about a reduction of France's influence in a 25-country European Union that will be yet more difficult to control. The belief that a wider Europe has become a vehicle for free-market globalization and American hegemony is spreading in France. The support of the new member states of Central and Eastern Europe for the war in Iraq has strengthened these feelings and led to President Chirac's controversial comments about these countries "having lost an opportunity to keep quiet."

In addition, resentment of the EU bureaucracy in Brussels, while not new, increased recently when the European Commission demanded that France and Germany make painful efforts to reduce their budget deficits and initially opposed the French government's efforts to rescue the French engineering giant Alstom. The fact that in the new European Commission there will be only one French Commissioner (Jacques Barrot) who will deal with a minor portfolio (transport), while in the previous Commission two major Commissioners were French (Michel Barnier for regional policy, Pascal Lamy for trade policy), has created a big debate on the declining influence of France in Europe.

The political parties are consequently divided on the question of European integration. The extreme right-wing has traditionally been anti-European and remains powerful although its leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, is growing old. The center-right, under the leadership of Chirac, is broadly pro-European and sees Europe as an opportunity for promoting structural economic reforms in France. But there are still some within the center-right who are either hostile to Europe or reluctant to further integration. The center left is mostly pro-European, but the Socialist Party is under pressure from the parties of the extreme left (the French Communist Party and various Trotskyite parties) that are anti-Europe because of its free-market "liberal" connotations. Many socialists are themselves worried about the difficulty of promoting a "social Europe" and see a contradiction between their European and their social convictions.

This ambivalence is particularly obvious on the issue of Turkey. President Chirac is committed, like all governments in Europe, to the Turkish candidacy to the EU. French public opinion, however, is most opposed to Turkish entry into the EU. Chirac's own political party officially expressed its hostility to Turkish membership during the European parliamentary elections. With a similar ambivalence, the Socialists are, in principle, in favor of Turkish membership because they do not accept the notion of a "Christian Europe"; however they would prefer to postpone the decision to open accession negotiations with Turkey.

Complicating this already confusing picture is the growing and widespread indifference of the French population toward European integration. Indeed, while the parties hostile to Europe (Le Pen's extreme right and Charles Pasqua's and Philippe de Villiers' anti-European movements) all saw a decline in their share of the vote in the June 2004 European Parliamentary elections, the more striking fact was the 57% abstention rate, a 7 point increase over the previous election in 1999. This represents the continuation of a trend toward lack of interest in European elections.

Will France remain Pro-European?

France is experiencing a decline in its commitment to Europe and a drop in public identification with the European project. There is a real risk that a rising tide of discontent will carry the day in a referendum on the European Constitutional Treaty. President Chirac has taken a real risk in putting the issue before the French public, but if he had not, he would have lent credence to the notion that Europe is a technocratic construction made by and for the elite. The Socialists are in an even more uncomfortable situation: they supported the idea of a referendum on the Constitution, but are divided on the appropriate answer. Before the national referendum takes place, the Socialist Party has to organize its own internal referendum (probably by the end of the year). Although many of the party's leading lights, such as Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Pierre Moscovici, Bertrand Delanoë, Martine Aubry and the secretary general François Hollande, are in favor of ratification, there is a strong tendency against it. Laurent Fabius, who may be the socialist candidate in the next presidential election in 2007, has already expressed his opposition.[2] If the referendum happened to be negative among the socialists, the chance that the European Constitution be ratified in France would be very low.

In any case, France is not the only country that has reservations and doubts about European integration. The United Kingdom is suspicious of Europe, but has realized it has no other choice but to pursue its place in Europe. Germany is increasingly dissatisfied with the bureaucracy at the European Commission and reluctant to continue giving so much money to Brussels. Small countries like Denmark, Ireland, and Sweden are reticent about integration and fear becoming dominated by the larger countries. The new member states of Central and Eastern Europe do not

[2] Fabius would accept the Constitution if some conditions which have nothing to do with the document itself were fulfilled (e.g. concerning reform of the Stability and Growth Pact, increasing the EU budget, the harmonization of the tax policy, and a European law protecting public services). But the fulfillment of these conditions is unlikely in the short run.

want excessive constraints imposed on their new-found sovereignty, but they need financial help from the Western countries to catch up economically.

To overcome this general crisis a two-pronged approach would be necessary. First, the democratic legitimacy of the European institutional framework should be strengthened, but that will prove difficult because of the absence of a European public sphere (the so-called "democratic deficit" in the European integration process). Second, "leadership" must be strengthened which firstly requires action by the Franco-German engine in the areas of economic policy and foreign policy. This leadership is in the interest of all, but other states tend to reject it when they perceive it as a "directory." For the future of European integration France has to accept two changes which are not easy given the country's national identity: the acceptance of supranational rules and the replacement of an assertive approach by a persuasive approach. What is at stake in the next referendum on the European Constitution is the ability of France to accept a Europe that will not necessarily look like France.