



François Hollande's Presidency: A New Era in French Foreign Policy?

Jean-Pierre Darnis

Abstract

François Hollande's election as president of the French republic seems to mark a political rupture, interrupting 17 years of right wing presidencies (under Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy) and a decade of conservative government. Hollande claims that he will be a "normal" president, in contrast with Sarkozy's flamboyant style. This paper assesses whether Hollande's presidency truly represents a turning point in France's trajectory by gauging its impact on French foreign policy. The argument elaborated below is that French foreign policy is and will continue to be driven by strong continuities, although differences in style are likely to impinge upon France's role in the world and in the EU.

Keywords: *France / Foreign policy / Defence policy / NATO / European Union / United States / Africa / Middle East*

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by Jean-Pierre Darnis*

1. The contours of continuity in French foreign policy

The French autonomous nuclear dissuasion - *la force de frappe* - epitomizes France's status as a middle power that continues to strive for global defence capabilities. Like his predecessors, Hollande has clearly ruled out a revision of French nuclear capabilities, and France's related primacy within the international system through its permanent UN Security Council membership.

In 1981, when Mitterand's socialists came to power, there was much talk of a foreign policy shift, generating heightened concerns among France's NATO partners. A socialist government, with communists on board, was perceived as the cause of a potential rupture in the pro-Western French position, as the government advocated a new foreign policy more responsive to the demands of the developing world. Rhetoric aside, however, France respected its commitments towards the Alliance. Today's political lexicon is far removed from the leftist tones of the early 1980s. Notwithstanding Hollande's criticism of France's return within NATO's military command, there has not been and there is unlikely to be a contrary decision to that effect. True, Hollande has put forward a new calendar for the withdrawal of French troops from Afghanistan.¹ This was a crucial message that candidate Hollande had to send, particularly to his left-wing electorate. But beyond this, we are unlikely to see further policy shifts and revisions to France's policy within NATO.

Jean-Yves Le Drian, the newly appointed Minister of Defence, immediately launched a strategic defence policy review, that is a new edition of the *livre blanc* to be completed by 2012 and then translated in a new defence planning law in 2013. Even if this appears a tightening of the timeframe, the strategic review will be coordinated by Jean-Claude Mallet, the very same high-level civil servant who led Sarkozy's strategic review. In other words, continuity is likely to mark much of the content of France's defence policy review. Furthermore, the speeding up of the process and the redefinition of France's defence planning are due to two independent variables beyond the personality and programme of the president himself: lessons learned from Libya and a pessimistic budget forecast, both of which induce new calculations when debating issues of defence capability and size.

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¹ French fighting troops in Afghanistan are planned to be withdrawn by the end of 2012, while the original NATO calendar stated 2014 as a limit.

This said, the use of military power was indeed a peculiarity of Sarkozy's presidency. The intervention in the Ivory Coast and Libya were remarkable in this respect, with France deploying a mix of diplomatic and military instruments, effectively lobbying the UN Security Council to adopt resolutions while also displaying a readiness to pursue regional strategic interests through the use of force.

In the case of the Ivory Coast, Sarkozy's personalization of politics shone through, as Ivory Coast president, Alassane Ouattara, was often presented as Sarkozy's personal friend. Nonetheless, François Hollande also favoured the French intervention in Abidjan, suggesting that although Sarkozy displayed a marked preference to vaunt his Commander in Chief epaulettes, there is likely to be significant continuity between the two presidencies. Likewise on Syria, soon after his election, Hollande spoke out, not ruling out a military intervention under a UN mandate.²

In other words, France's defence policy is likely to be marked by substantial continuities, despite important differences in style, with Hollande displaying greater caution than his predecessor, which may in turn influence the overall evolution of French foreign policy.

As all member states, France's foreign policy cannot be assessed without an eye to the country's EU policy. Particularly at the current juncture of crisis, France's EU policy not only tops the foreign policy agenda. It is part and parcel of the country's domestic policy. The linkage between domestic and EU policy is so strong today that it cannot be described as a priority on the agenda; it is *the* agenda.

Alongside this, France will continue to pursue a mix of bilateral relations and multilateralism at the global level, pursuing through bilateral and multilateral channels its vision of the world, with traditional peculiarities such as human rights promotion and an emphasis on cultural policy. This vision is the product of a global policy based on the sense of universalism stemming from the French revolution and of being a global power as a consequence of the colonial experience and the possession of the nuclear bomb. Classic state-to-state bilateral relations correspond to this vision of France's role in the world. Alongside this, France is also playing the role of a middle power in a multilateral context. The UN and the EU are the main contexts in which France develops its action. For this reason we can observe a transformation of French foreign policy instruments. Some tension exists between national instruments (such as autonomous defence and diplomatic capabilities) and multilateral initiatives. Nevertheless, the multilateral process, and more specifically the European Union, appears today as the only realistic framework to be able to promote French interests in the world.

Specifically, like his predecessors dating back to De Gaulle, Hollande will continue to balance realism and idealism in the conduct of French foreign policy in particular vis-à-vis the European Union, NATO, the UN, nuclear policy, African geopolitics, and global human rights promotion. Across these traditional domains of French foreign policy,

² "Hollande n'exclut pas une intervention armée sous mandat de l'ONU en Syrie", in *France24*, 29/05/2012, <http://www.france24.com/fr/20120529-france-hollande-intervention-armee-syrie-mandat-onu-russie-chinois-bachar-assad>.

Hollande will continue to simultaneously project French power by embedding specific norms within the framework of French foreign policy.

2. Discerning signs of change in French foreign policy

Within a broad framework of continuity in France's traditional foreign policy path, let us now turn to the differences between the Hollande and Sarkozy presidencies, which may modify France's future international and EU postures.

2.1. France's Transatlantic and EU policies

Hollande's first decision was the nomination of a new Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault and the ensuing establishment of a new cabinet. An analysis of the personalities involved provides a series of indicators of the future trajectory of French foreign and EU policy.

First, the Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, is an experienced and well-rooted politician, known for his sound management of the city of Nantes and his political skills as a long-time president of the socialist group in parliament. Furthermore, Ayrault started his professional career as a high-school German teacher. As such, he has developed direct contacts with German socialists (SPD), cultivating a special relationship with them, which is already bearing its first fruits as Hollande has set out to remould the French-German axis within a crisis-stricken Europe. It is indeed very peculiar to observe that on the 13th June 2012, while Hollande was negotiating with Angela Merkel an economic reform agenda for the survival of the Euro, he received the German socialist leaders, opponents to Chancellor Merkel, in order to put external and internal pressure on Berlin. This two-track approach by President Hollande reflects Merkel's own position in favour of Sarkozy during the French presidential campaign.

Laurent Fabius was nominated Minister of Foreign Affairs. As a former Prime Minister under Mitterrand's presidency, Fabius is well-experienced. His style is often described as "Mitterrand-Gaullist", meaning he supports a rather conservative vision of France's national role and prerogatives. His nomination also hints at a certain come-back of Hubert Vedrine's concept of French foreign policy, given the return of Vedrine-bred diplomats to key desks at the *Quai d'Orsay*. Vedrine can be considered as the most preeminent foreign affairs expert in the socialist family, whose foreign policy understanding is encapsulated by his view of America's "hyperpower" in the late 1990s, which called for a European - and French - counterforce. Vedrine's view can be read as a modern version of the classic French preference for an autonomous foreign policy role, always prickly when it comes to relations with Washington. From Fabius' nomination to the return of Vedrinian diplomats, French diplomacy has followed a conservative footpath.

Not only can Fabius' nomination reverberate on France's transatlantic relations. It has also provoked concern about France's European policy. In 2005, Fabius campaigned against the EU Constitutional Treaty, against his party's line. This episode contributed to the perception of Fabius being Europe's foe. Concerns about France's European policy are not confined to Fabius' nomination. Two other personalities have raised

eyebrows in Europe. The new Minister for European Affairs, Bernard Cazeneuve, also opposed France's ratification of the Constitutional Treaty. Alongside him, Arnaud Montebourg, a rather emphatic personality who advocates European protectionism, was assigned the portfolio of "productive recovery". These three nominations resonate amongst a French electorate that has repeatedly expressed its fears about Europe and globalization. Precisely because of this, they have sparked a French and EU-wide debate about the future of France's EU policy.

These nominations notwithstanding, a sober analysis suggests that the broad contours of France's EU policy will remain largely unchanged. While moving away from Sarkozy's personalized style, François Hollande himself will continue to follow the foreign and European policy dossier, as a key prerogative of the French head of state. Hollande is aware of the imperatives of economic interdependence and of fostering more integrated governance at the EU and global levels. Here the influence of two former EU leaders - former Commission President Jacques Delors, and former Commissioner and WTO Director Pascal Lamy - as well as Director of the French financial service authority - Jean-Pierre Jouyet - point towards a clear counterforce to the more Eurosceptic and protectionist Fabius-Cazeneuve-Montebourg trio. Jouyet, Hollande's personal friend, is often quoted as the future director of the *Caisse des dépôts et consignation*,³ the French public investment fund, thus playing a strategic role in Hollande's economic policy. The *Caisse des dépôts* is a key institution which could play a central role in a public investment policy to favour economic growth and connect France with the development of EU-level initiatives such as project bonds.

Also, Finance Minister Pierre Moscovici will inevitably play a key role in the new government and in France's EU policy. As former Member of the European Parliament and Minister of European Affairs, he is indisputably "euro-minded", and is expected to be on the frontline defending the Eurozone and economic stability.

More broadly, the eurozone crisis will inevitably top Hollande's agenda. During his presidential campaign, Hollande had to engage with an electorate which associated the economic crisis with "Europe" and was sceptical of decisions taken in Brussels. Hence, candidate François Hollande, just like Nicolas Sarkozy before him, developed a rather nationalistic approach. President Hollande, by contrast, is already following a very different path. Soon after being elected, he received the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, and the President of the Eurogroup, Jean-Claude Juncker, a clear indication of the priority accorded by him to EU institutions. Hollande appears willing to reshape France's EU policy by favouring a more communitarian approach, as well as by building coalitions with several member states.

Obviously this hinges on the evolution of relations between Paris and Berlin. When Sarkozy began his presidential mandate in 2007, the personal chemistry with Chancellor Angela Merkel was not ideal. It was their joint steering through the troubled waters of the crisis that led to the gradual build-up of trust between the two, explaining Merkel's subsequent siding with Sarkozy during the French presidential race.

³ AFP, "Jouyet pressenti à la Caisse des dépôts mais, selon Bercy, 'aucune décision prise'", in *Public Sénat*, 25/05/2012, <http://www.publicsenat.fr/lcp/politique/jouyet-presenti-caisse-des-d-p-ts-selon-bercy-aucune-d-cision-prise-272298>.

Notwithstanding, Hollande presents himself as a critical partner for Germany. True, during his campaign, he accused his opponent of being too soft in negotiations with Germany. Upon his electoral victory, however, he traveled to Berlin to meet Merkel even if his plane was struck by lightning. Some differences have emerged, with Hollande supporting the creation of Eurobonds despite Merkel's resistance. But the two are equally keen to keep Greece within the Eurozone, limiting the economic risks for the EU.

Since this first meeting, Hollande has adopted a tactical approach towards Germany. He has signaled his will to seek alternative EU partnerships, in an unveiled attempt to isolate Merkel both in Europe and in Germany, where she faces stiff opposition by the SPD. But this posturing is not meant to last. French-German relations have always and will continue to represent the driving engine of European governance. Since the 1963 Elysée Treaty, France and Germany have developed a set of inter-governmental mechanisms which represent a consolidated and institutionalized feature of their bilateral relations. When François Mitterrand was elected President in 1981, he initially favoured a diversification of French partnerships within Europe, for example turning to the southern member states (Spain, Italy). But he quickly returned to the Franco-German core, pragmatically understanding that Germany cannot be circumvented in Europe. The same situation applies today.

This does not mean that France will not engage with other member states. For example, Sarkozy had developed a specific relationship with the United Kingdom on security and defence matters in view of convergences between Paris and London in terms of defense capabilities and foreign policy interests. Under Hollande's presidency we may see a renewed convergence of views with Italy. In 2011, a host of economic and political questions - ranging from the divergences about the intervention in Libya to the Parmalat takeover by the French group Lactalis - clouded French-Italian relations. Tensions have lowered since then, but the deep integration of key industrial sectors such as energy and aerospace would warrant closer governmental cooperation. There is definitely space for specific French-Italian initiatives, but in order to be successful bilateral agreements would need to be cast within a broader EU framework.

A final note about Hollande's EU policy regards the evolution of EU relations with Turkey. Here too we can expect an important difference between Hollande and Sarkozy. Sarkozy's position was clear-cut. He always and consistently claimed that Turkey had no "European vocation". This closed door policy provoked critical setbacks in relations between Ankara and Paris. Hollande has adopted a more open attitude, calling for accession negotiations to be conducted in good faith.⁴ Hollande is respectful of the EU's institutional logic. But this does not mean that France will become an advocate of Turkey's EU membership. Chirac's initial and Sarkozy's ensuing and consistent opposition to Turkey's entry were largely dictated by domestic public opinion and the perceived link between Turkey's accession and the growth of France's Muslim population. This fear is still alive and well, and the new socialist president is aware he must be cautious with the symbolism entailed by the Turkey question. This explains

⁴ "Politique étrangère: ce qu'en dit François Hollande", in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 16/04/2012, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/election-presidentielle-2012/20120416.OBS6301/politique-etrangere-ce-qu-en-dit-francois-hollande.html>.

Hollande's emphasis on the long-term nature of Turkey's accession process, a subtle attempt to play down the issue while the institutional process unfolds. Inevitably, however, the question of whether France will lift its veto over the opening of a number of accession negotiation chapters will arise. Lifting its veto and taking a back-seat on Turkey's accession process would already mark an important shift from the recent past.

Turning to defence, Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister of Defence, has launched a military review process which has a strong potential impact on France's defence industrial policy. He has declared his will to reinforce cooperation among Europeans partners, a line which could reverberate negatively amongst a nationalistic group like Dassault.⁵ There is a clear need to redefine EU military capabilities in light of fiscal austerity and operational needs. Through the *livre blanc*, Le Drian has launched a political operation in order to gain legitimacy for future cuts and decisions. The current European defence industry situation recalls that of the late 1990s, when defence ministers such as Alain Richard in France, Beniamino Andreatta in Italy, George Robertson in the UK and Volker Ruhe in Germany fostered deeper cooperation.⁶ This is certainly an opportunity for France to cast itself at the centre of a renewed effort in this direction, after a period in which bilateral cooperation with the UK was badly received by others EU partners.

Hollande's rather nationalistic campaign and some conservative elements in the new socialist government suggest a marginal turn away from the EU. Nevertheless, there are numerous clear signs that indicate a growing focus on EU policy. The Eurozone crisis is obviously the number one issue on the agenda, but also the importance of the bilateral French-German relationship suggests that Hollande will be completely absorbed by the European scenario. Certainly, French leaders often express their fear about losses of sovereignty, a factor that could hinder the emerging consensus for further political integration. But France clearly wants to safeguard Europe and Hollande will play his role in this, as Mitterrand did during Germany's reunification.

2.2. Beyond Europe: Africa, the Middle East and the BRICS

During his presidential campaign, Hollande called for a revision of France's Africa policy, ending the so-called *Françafrique*, a traditional reckless pursuit of political and business interests on the continent.⁷ Hollande has called for greater transparency, putting an end to corruption and shadow diplomacy in French-African relations. The nomination of Pascal Canfin, a former green MEP who founded the NGO Finance Watch, as Minister Delegate for Development is a clear sign of Hollande's will to clean up relations with Africa. However, we must also recall that the same will was expressed in Sarkozy's 2007 campaign and the ensuing nomination of Jean-Marie Bockel as

⁵ Michel Cabirol, "Jean-Yves Le Drian, l'homme qui voulait devenir à tout prix ministre de la Défense", in *La Tribune*, 16/05/2012, <http://www.latribune.fr/actualites/economie/france/20120516trib000698915/jean-yves-le-drian-l-homme-qui-voulait-devenir-a-tout-prix-ministre-de-la-defense-.html>. Dassault, French military airplane producer, has often illustrated France's will to pursue its own goals and industrial development, refusing European cooperation to build fighter jets.

⁶ To that extend, we recall the signing in 1998 of the Letter of Intent (LoI) to promote a European action plan to assist defence industry cooperation. See *Measures to Facilitate the Restructuring of European Defence Industry*, Letter of Intent between the defence ministers of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom, London, 6 July 1998, <http://www.grip.org/bdg/g1015.html>.

⁷ "Politique étrangère: ce qu'en dit François Hollande", cit.

Development minister, who also advocated a cleaner French African policy. After only one year, Bockel was removed from office and sent to the Ministry for War Veterans. The pressure exerted by African leaders such as Gabon's Omar Bongo and Bockel's competition with Sarkozy's Special Advisor on African affairs, Robert Bourgi, quickly closed the door to the former president's attempted policy revision.⁸ Today Hollande has clearly stated that the French presidency will refrain from dealing with Africa through a shadow cabinet and will assign a limited role to special advisors who shall not trump government policy.⁹ Alongside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' efforts to scrutinize aid flows more carefully and limit tax havens, these steps indicate an important potential shift in French policy towards Africa, which will nonetheless continue to wrestle against *realpolitik* and the unabashed pursuit of business interests on the continent.

As far as the Mediterranean is concerned, the French vision of a grand policy - the Union for the Mediterranean - has been swept away both by the new dynamics unleashed by the Arab spring and by the departure of its principal sponsor Nicolas Sarkozy. The Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) was a quintessentially French project, deeply rooted in the country's post-colonial history. As such, it cannot be viewed as exclusive to the right-wing UMP party. Some socialists also backed and contributed to this project. But the UfM has been now buried by the political evolution on the EU's southern shores. This eclipse could represent an opportunity to re-launch the EU's Mediterranean policies, including the bilateral neighborhood policy as well as multilateral initiatives. Within this context, Hollande's France could seize the opportunity to remould its role in the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern panorama.

Some differences between Sarkozy and Hollande regarding the Middle East have already emerged. Sarkozy had a special eye for Israel's security. When speaking about Iran, he supported a diplomatic solution but tirelessly pointed out that France would stand by the side of Israel in case of threat.¹⁰ Hollande's position remains largely the same, but it does not put the same hawkish emphasis on Israel's security, a small but far from unimportant difference that could reflect a return to a socialist-backed pro-Palestinian orientation.

The change in style from Sarkozy's personalized foreign policy to Hollande's "normal" presidency could have substantive repercussions on France's Middle East policy. Sarkozy rarely missed an opportunity to bask in the international limelight. A case in point was his former wife Cecilia's highly publicized trip to Libya to negotiate the freeing of Bulgarian nurses detained by Gaddafi's regime in July 2007, a personal initiative far from classic diplomacy. Sarkozy also developed a special and very personalized

⁸ Philippe Perdrux, "Jean-Marie Bockel : 'Les accusations de Bourgi sont le chant du cygne de la Françafrique'", in *Jeune Afrique*, 30/09/2011, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Articles/Dossier/ARTJAJA2645p024-030.xml1/france-gouvernement-gabon-corruptionjean-marie-bockel-les-accusations-de-bourgi-sont-le-chant-du-cygne-de-la-francafrique.html>.

⁹ See Thomas Wieder, "Comment François Hollande organise l'Elysée", in *Le Monde*, 04/06/2012, http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/06/04/comment-francois-hollande-organise-l-elysee_1712122_823448.html.

¹⁰ "Politique étrangère: ce qu'en dit Nicolas Sarkozy", in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 17/04/2012, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/election-presidentielle-2012/20120417.OBS6410/politique-etrangere-ce-qu-en-dit-nicolas-sarkozy.html>.

relationship with Qatar, engaging in multiple meetings with Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa al-Thani. Qatar indeed became France's main ally in the Arabian Gulf, leading to Qatar's rising investments in France, from the takeover of Paris Saint Germain, a prominent soccer team supported by Sarkozy, to the 13% share of the L'Oréal Group, which brought Qatar close to the European Aerospace Defence and Space (EADS) turntable. Qatar also engaged in highly publicized investment initiatives in France's depressed urban areas, the *banlieues*. Finally Qatar was a key military and diplomatic partner during the Libya crisis, providing a critical element of legitimacy to the French-backed (and led) military intervention in the Muslim world. Hollande's pragmatism suggests that he will strive to retain close ties with Qatar. Soon after his election, he received the Qatari Prime Minister Hamad Bin Jassim al-Thani to send a clear message of continuity. But Sheikh al-Thani and Sarkozy had developed a special relationship, bolstering each other's foreign policy activism. Hollande will seek to retain much of this relationship, but it may lose some of the symbolic gloss acquired during his predecessor's tenure.

Turning further afield to the "BRICS" (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and the recently added South Africa), we are unlikely to witness any major change. With respect to Russia and China, Hollande's France will continue to pursue a traditionally pragmatic approach. A more interesting case of potential change regards instead Brazil in view of the affinities between the French socialists and the Brazilian left, which could lead to improved relations between the two countries. Although bilateral relations are already fairly good, they could be strengthened particularly at the symbolic level, in a way that would pay off domestically in France, winning the support of the greens and the left.

Conclusions

Hollande's presidency and its implications raise a number of issues for the EU and its member states. It highlights that foreign policy and EU policy have become increasingly integrated, as the former must be understood far more as a - critical - dimension of domestic policy. It also reveals that in the classic foreign policy domain beyond the EU, France maintains and pursues a particular vision of the world which may change in limited but important ways under Hollande's presidency. When it comes to the EU instead, reality is far more complex warranting continuous compromises, which are sometimes difficult to explain to voters. Within the EU, Sarkozy had given in to his natural tendency to personalize policy by engaging in first person mediation in Europe, as symbolized by his duo with Angela Merkel. In line with his different style, Hollande will also pursue this key mediating role, furthering the Europeanization of French domestic politics.

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