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## Transcript

# French Foreign Policy: A New Interventionism?

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**Maurice Fraser:**

Well ladies and gentlemen, a warm welcome to this conference on *French Foreign Policy: A New Interventionism?* These are certainly very interesting times. There's nothing more conducive to a good conference, in my experience, than the idea that it's tackling the, addressing the dismantling of long held assumptions. And certainly I think the counterfactuals to the idea of French exceptionalism in foreign policy seem to be accumulating at an almost sort of dizzying rate, and where does one start? If we think of the last few years, well in no particular order, Nicolas Sarkozy announcing the demise of Françafrique is one that I seem to recall. The disappearance from the media in the last few years of the old language of La France [in French 00:05:17]. That's another one we don't hear very much of any more. Of course the full reintegration into NATO's military structure, we can think of that. We can think of Nicolas Sarkozy, the day after he was elected, doing his first press call going jogging in a New York Police Department sweatshirt very ostentatiously and, as I say, the assumptions seem to be being dismantled rather sort of thick and fast.

Some of the images of the last 10, 20 years seared on the imagination, like one might think of Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schröder, and Vladimir Putin, sharing a joke at the expense of British cuisine. I'm sure plenty of people here will remember that. Well again that seems a very, very long time ago. And of course now British media really describing or picking up references in the US political establishment to France as now possibly the United States' closest ally. We can think of the military interventions in fairly rapid succession, well first of all in Libya then in Mali, even a question mark over what is going to happen next in Central African Republic, which the French defence establishment appears to be starting to think about as well.

And, of course, France leading international action for a muscular, the most muscular response possible, both towards Iran and its nuclear ambitions, and of course to Syria. And effectively, I won't say unwittingly because I think the French are entirely happy with this but effectively through this extraordinary close, extraordinarily closer and closer defence cooperation with the United Kingdom effectively changing emphasis on the building of the European Common Security and Defence Policy - remember all those theological arguments in the 1990s about how to reconcile French type ambitions for a European defence identity with the Atlantic Alliance, that dispute seems to have been overtaken as well. So we seem to be living in a very different foreign policy world.

Whether all this is really new or whether France is reverting to type, dare I say almost a sort of neo-conservative type since the fourth republic and since the immediate postwar period. Were in fact President De Gaulle and Jacques Chirac, the most obvious examples of French, were they exceptions to French foreign policy orthodoxy since the immediate postwar period? That seems to be a question, which is not an entirely playful one but which has some potential. But all of these questions, and I'm sure far more interesting ones than I've raised, are now going to be examined, tested by our two distinguished guests.

And Chatham House have, I think, really put together a fantastic cast list in the two guests I'm about to introduce. Very briefly, I'm Maurice Fraser. I'm an associate fellow here at Chatham House, and professor of European politics at the LSE and head of the LSE European Institute. I'm delighted to be light-touch moderating a discussion between our two guests today. Immediately I'll begin with our elected politician, such is protocol in events like this, and I know Christian Lequesne won't take that amiss at all. Bruno Le Maire will be known I'm sure to many of you. He was France's Europe minister. He's policy advisor to the main centre-right party, the UMP (Union for a Popular Movement), for several years. He's had many important portfolios in the French government and he was also advisor to Dominique de Villepin when he was France's foreign minister, and we're delighted that he should have made the trip over today to come and talk to us about French foreign policy.

On my right is Professor Christian Lequesne, one of France's best known and certainly most distinguished political scientists, and he's a professor at Sciences Po. He has also been joint professor of Sciences Po and LSE and very much a part of, in a sense, the LSE extended family, but he is a Sciences Po man. He's director of the CERI Sciences Po, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales at Sciences Po. And Christian, thank you very, very much for coming today as well, and you have a lot of work in hand at the moment I gather on French foreign policy, and indeed published extensively as well.

So without further ado, we will move into the guts of the discussion. We'll follow a normal practice, brief presentations from our speakers, a few minutes each, and then I'm sure a lively discussion involving everybody here. Bruno, would you like to kick off?

**Bruno Le Maire:**

Yes, thank you Maurice. And first of all, I would like to thank the organizers of this conference at Chatham House. I would also like to apologize for my very poor English but you know my father had this very strange idea to force me to learn German, and that's why I'm fluent in German but not in English, and that's why I speak English like a German, I apologize for this. I will try to give you a few guidelines about the French foreign policy, as a former diplomat, as a former advisor to Dominique de Villepin during the Iraqi crisis and also as a French MP, but I would like to begin with this very brief remark about France and the UK by underlining that there is something common between the UK and France.

We used to be, both of us, great powers and that's why we attach great importance to foreign policy and to the role that we have to play on the international stage, and I think that it remains the truth today. We are both permanent members of the United Nations Security Council which gives us, of course, huge responsibility on the international stage. We remain involved in very important negotiations, for instance the negotiation about the future of the Iran nuclear programme and we keep, of course, a very strong relationship to our former colonies. I would say for France to Africa, and even if each president of the republic tries to say well, and tries to pretend that we will get rid of the so-called *Françafrique* each time we are obliged or we are driven to this so called *Françafrique*, and the very last remarks made by François Hollande with the necessity of having a military intervention in central Africa, proves that it is not so easy to get rid of the so-called *Françafrique*. But of course things are changing and changing fast, and we have to go behind the curtain of this international stage to understand the new rules of a new diplomacy otherwise we, and when I say we I mean the UK and France, we really run the risk of being marginalized on the international stage.

So let me try to give you, and to propose you some guidelines for this new French diplomacy. The first point I would like to stress is that policy is not driven or at least supported by economy, so if France wants to keep an important role on the international stage, and especially on the European stage, it has to overcome its huge economic difficulties. There won't be any political influence without a strong economic recovery. We have to engage both structural reforms so that we will have a new growth, we will be able to create jobs and we will be able to remain at the same level as Germany and as the UK. If we don't want Europe to be driven by Germany and by the Germany economy, we need France to engage as soon as possible to those

dramatic economic reforms. I had this morning a very interesting meeting with David Lidington and we had an exchange of views on this necessity of having those economic reforms taken by the French government.

The second point I would like to stress is that we should never weaken what is at the core of the French influence on the international stage. I will give you two specific examples. The first one is the United Nations Security Council. It is at the core of the French influence on the international stage so we should never take any kind of decision that might weaken the United Nations Security Council. That's why last August I decided to oppose the choice of President François Hollande to engage a strike against Syria, after the chemical bombing against civilians in Syria. Of course I have been shocked, like everybody, by the civilian bombing and by the chemical bombing of civilian populations in Syria but I really think that it was not a good choice for the French diplomacy to support the idea of the American administration to strike Syria.

First of all because what was the solution the day after the bombing? What was the political position? What was the political outcome? What was the political negotiation, and diplomatic negotiations that we could engage after a strike against Syria against the interest of the Iran, against the interest of Russia in close ally Syria? Secondly because when you decide to bypass the United Nations Security Council, of course the legitimacy of the United Nations Security Council will be weakened and will be jeopardized. And I have been to New York to have a discussion with Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and we were exactly on the same line. France would have been in a better shape, and in a better situation if France had decided to play the game of the United Nations Security Council, and to play the game of the international rule of law.

A second example I would like to give in a totally different matter and in a totally different field is the question of culture and education. Culture and education are two strengths and two assets of the French diplomacy, and in a period when states are obliged to cut public expenses, to diminish taxes, we have to make some choices, what we want to put at the core of our international influence, and I'm deeply convinced that culture, education should remain at the core of the French international influence. French diplomacy, international diplomacy is not limited to the question of military intervention or political influence. We also have to take into account the importance of cultural influence and what we call soft power. So when there is a choice to make whether you have to close down an embassy or a French lycée, I would prefer to close an embassy than to close a French lycée.

The third point is that I really think that French diplomacy should better define its priorities, and when I say French diplomacy I would also say a European diplomacy. What are our diplomatic priorities nowadays? We have to make choices, we don't have any more the possibility of any kind of overstretch so we have to make some choices. I would like to propose to you three choices. The first one of course is the European construction, it is for us, for the French diplomacy the most important point. We have to reinforce our relationship with Germany, we have to reinforce our integration within the eurozone, with the 17 member states of the eurozone, and we also have - I will come back to this point - to reinforce on the military field our relationship with the UK.

The second priority is of course the fight against terrorism, and that's why even if I criticized the idea of President François Hollande to go hand in hand with Barack Obama on Syria I was very much supportive, and I remain supportive to the idea of a military intervention in Mali, because a military intervention of Mali is based on the idea of fighting against terrorism, and we cannot accept the expansion of Islamist terrorism in Mali, in Africa and in other parts of the world. The third priority is the necessity of fighting against any kind of nuclear or chemical proliferation. This is the role that we have to play within the United Nations Security Council and as a permanent member of this council. That's why I think that this agreement that has been reached with Iran on the fight against nuclear proliferation is a very good one, even if we have to remain very cautious, even if we have to keep an eye, and a very close eye, to what is happening on the nuclear programme in Iran I think that it is a good step in the right direction. I've been personally involved since 2003 in this negotiation with Iran and with Mr [Hassan] Rouhani on the nuclear programme, and I think that what has been achieved by UK, by the United States, by France, on this nuclear programme is a very good step in the right direction.

The last guideline is to tighten our links with our allies. I have already mentioned the necessity of tightening our links with European countries, I would just like to insist on the necessity of keeping a close relationship to the UK on the military field. When you are looking at all the member states of the EU, there are two countries that keep some military capacities, capabilities which allow them to make some military interventions in Africa, in the Middle East or in the very dangerous countries. This is UK and this is France, and that's why today there is no other solution but to tighten our links with the UK on the military field. It does not mean that we have to get rid of the idea of having one day a European defence identity, but it is not for today and I'm

afraid it won't be for tomorrow. It will take time before we will be able to have a common European defence identity, and instead of waiting to this identity I would prefer to reinforce the links between UK and France on this very important question of military means, of strategic means, intelligence means. I really think that on all those fields we have a lot of things to do together. These are the main guidelines I wanted to present to you, but I will be very happy to answer to your question after the intervention of my friend. Thank you.

**Maurice Fraser:**

Well Bruno, thank you for a very crisp and punchy set of propositions. I think it's getting us off to a cracking start, thank you. I should have just said, incidentally, that this meeting is being held on the record. Christian, over to you, you have a few minutes to share your wisdom with us.

**Christian Lequesne:**

Thank you very much, Maurice, for the invitation, it's a great pleasure to be back in London. I have to say that myself I have a French father and a German mother and this is why I'm a great fan of the UK, of course, everybody knows that. Well if you are reading the press, and I'm sure you're doing that regularly, well you see a lot of comments, especially in the American press, about the external image of France, which is probably better than the image of the government at home. The government has a better image outside the country than in the country, I'm not going to comment a lot on the survey. Well there is one field, and it has been said already by Bruno Le Maire, where external policy is totally linked to domestic policy, this is the European policy. And I worry a bit as an EU specialist about the current position of France within the European Union. There is clearly a low profile, and this low profile is totally linked to the difficulties of doing structural reforms at home, so no choice.

If France is not going to reform the welfare state, which is a very generous welfare state, but not only the welfare state, also the working markets. If France is not developing incentives for the firms, especially small and medium size enterprise, well it would be difficult to have a leadership within the European Union, especially after the re-election of Mrs [Angela] Merkel, and even if it's a great coalition, you have followed of course the agreement about the minimum wage and things like this, well I don't think there are a lot

of differences between the [inaudible 00:26:03] on one side and the SPD [Social Democratic Party] on the question of the economic policy for Europe, so that's my first point. If France wants to play a role, as it has done in the past, within the EU well it has to succeed in its economic reforms.

Second, interventionism. Well, yes, I was reading an article in the *New York Times* a couple of days ago, the title was 'A New Assertiveness for France' or something like that. Well Africa, it has been said by Bruno Le Maire, if you read the 60 commitments of François Hollande there is one sentence, this is the programme for the 2012 election, I want to break with the tradition of Françafrique. It's not exactly what happened, but if you remember what Sarkozy said about his foreign policy *vis-à-vis* Africa it was exactly the same; I want to break with the Françafrique.

Well I think it's not really possible because you have many geopolitical interests. Mali was a real question of interest linked to the issue of terrorism, I agree on that. You have also a lot of networks in this part of the foreign policy where politicians, intelligence, business have strong networks. And there is another problem, and this is maybe a question for the UK, there is not so much interest from the other Europeans for Africa, so the French have to do the job to a certain extent, right. And this is very interesting. Why do the Europeans neglect Africa? A country which has such a big potential for the future. And if you see the strategy of China this is well known, but not only China, Turkey. I was in Brazil a couple of weeks ago, it's clear that in Brazil Africa is also a target for the future, so there is a question there. For a long time having a European defence policy was – well a good reason for the French to push also towards a European defence policy because, well the observation was NATO was not very interested in Africa.

What about this European defence policy? Well my impression is it is not so important as it was in Paris for many reasons. First, Maurice mentioned that France is back to the military command of NATO, the socialists were against but the first things they did when Hollande got the power was to ask Mr [Hubert] Védrine, who is a former minister of foreign affairs, to draft a report which says we have to be very pragmatic and we have to stay inside military command, so no renegotiation. So this question of being back to the military command has an impact probably on the other issue pushing towards more European defence. But there is also a British question. We don't feel a lot of support from the UK in Paris on this question. UK, it's okay to do bilateral stuff, very pragmatic. This is the Lancaster House 2010, you remember 2010, the problem with the negotiation was that the UK didn't want any mention of the European defence policy for the future, so it's a big problem.



It's a big problem because this is the only country which has military resources, so if there is no political push coming from London it will be very difficult. But we have exactly the same problems in London, it's difficult also to mobilize public opinions on the question of defence. Defence budget is decreasing 1.8, perspective 2020 is 1.2, and it's not only a French or British problem, it's generally a European problem because the level of threat, well the perception of threat is very weak in general in Europe.

On the question of Middle East, well it's clear that the question of anti-Americanism is very different than it was, let's say, fifteen years ago. It's decreasing. It's decreasing among the left, it's decreasing among the right parties. And the French, well Libya but also Syria, which was a failure to a certain extent for the French, the reasons to go there was probably because France has still a pretention to have a universal foreign policy focusing on the question of values, and in the Middle East it's particularly important because there is a feeling in Paris that we didn't understand very well what happened in the Arabic world with the Arabic Spring. It was not really anticipated, you know, this movement in the society. So now there's an idea that we have to support of course the democratic forces, we have to support those who are promoting democratic values etcetera, and the way to do that is interventionism.

But the problem is if you want to do interventionism you need to have military needs, and that's a problem. So Mr Hollande was too quick in the question of Syria, of course everybody knows about the story but, more important, he wanted to intervene in Syria with the American means, no other choice, you know what I mean. Mali was not so easy to get 15 air transport airplanes, it was difficult within the French airways, military airways. So that's a problem. There is a discrepancy between this policy of intervention is based on values and the military means, and the answer probably in Paris is we have to do that with the Americans because still they have the means.

Iran and the question of the negotiation on the nuclear plan, well we said a lot about a position of France which was tougher than the American position, etc. For me there was a lot of rhetoric on that, especially after what happened on Syria, it was important for the domestic audience to say we are not following the Americans like poodles, we have our own positions, etc., and we have to express that. But if you take the negotiation, I mean the substance, well there were very good bilateral relations between Paris and Washington on this field. The French did know about the shadow negotiations between Washington and Tehran, they were informed on that. And the Americans also need the expertise of the French. Bruno Le Maire was mentioning negotiation 2003, it's

true that on this question of non-proliferation the French are not bad at all. I mean they have expertise, coming from both the [in French 00:35:04] but also the Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique, people who really know the dossier. So I think even if Mr [Laurent] Fabius was doing this press conference in Geneva before the others etc., expressing a certain tough line, well in fact he was sure too that a compromise should be found at the end. Also because there are some pressures coming from the firms about the sanctions, Total, Renault, etc., Iran is not a small market.

So if I have to conclude, and I have to – first of all continuity, yes there is a lot of continuity in the foreign policy. It's not really something which is very split in terms of political parties, I mean foreign policy is less split than the rest. Lack of hierarchy, I agree on that. There is no real strategic views, it's more tactical than strategic, but maybe this is the way diplomacy is done in 2013 everywhere. I'm not sure that this big strategic scenario still exists. Discourse is better controlled compared to the Sarkozy period. There is no failure, I mean in terms of discourse when Sarkozy did some failure because sometimes he talked too quickly. And if I take the priorities, I think - I don't know where my notes are here. First Europe, well domestic reforms are absolutely crucial on the leadership France could have with Germany, and with the UK within Europe. And what strikes me finally as a conclusion, well a lot of expectation on Obama compared to other parts of the world.

Maybe the French have to see a bit more what's going on also with the Brits because on diplomacy it's not only the United States, especially the period where Obama is not so interested by Europe, so this is also a problem for UK. UK is talking about privileged partnership when Obama is not thinking in terms of privileged partnership with the UK, or with any other European country any more. So this is probably also something the French have to think about. We discovered the United States, but maybe in a period where some other countries have to be not rediscovered, but discovered. Thank you.