



BULLETIN

No. 84 (679), 13 June 2014 © PISM

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“D-Day” for France: Time for Paris to End Its Hedging on Russia

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Although France has been vocal in its condemnation of Russia since the annexation of Crimea, domestic pressures are forcing a quick normalisation of bilateral relations. President François Hollande has, notably, resisted pressure to freeze the delivery of Mistral-class vessels to Russia. Moreover, his diplomatic manoeuvres at the recent “D-Day” celebrations in Normandy might allow him not only to maintain the deal, but also to reaffirm the strength of his country’s strategic relations with Russia. Trying to isolate France on this matter is hardly a credible option for Poland, not least because Paris, unlike Berlin, has been a strong supporter of demands for strategic reassurances from NATO. Instead, Poland needs to adopt a constructive stance towards France in order to further secure its support for a long-term NATO presence on Polish soil, as well as regular targeted defence and contingency planning.

Russia has long occupied a particular place in France’s positioning on the world stage, not least through the establishment of a series of cynical “rear alliances” (notably the Franco–Soviet Treaty of 1936–1939). Based on the idea that “your rival’s rivals are your friends,” Russia has variously acted as a balance against Germany and then the U.S. in French thinking. This thinking survived the end of the Cold War, and indeed it was underpinned by growing trade relations between France and Russia. Despite over 60 years of Euro-Atlantic socialisation, not to mention France’s return to NATO’s integrated military command in 2009, a strand of political thinking in Paris still harks back to this scepticism towards the United States.

Following his election two years ago, Hollande promised a tougher line on Russia, citing concerns over its support to al-Assad’s regime in Syria as well as its domestic human rights situation. And yet, the political line has remained one of pragmatism, and of continuity of its right-wing predecessors’ stance.¹ France has been trying to engage Russia in *ad hoc* security cooperation when feasible (for example, regarding Mali and the Gulf of Aden), while dismissing Moscow’s role as a spoiler on crucial dossiers in the EU’s southern neighbourhood (such as Syria and Libya). Economic pressures reinforced this pragmatic attitude. Tellingly, prior to the Ukrainian crisis, the French Foreign Ministry had almost wholly abandoned any serious security monitoring on Eastern Europe, perceiving the threat from Russia as wholly scotched.

A Hardening of Tone. As late as January, the French authorities were still taking care not to antagonise Russia, wary of endangering the contract to provide Russia with €1.2 billion Mistral-class vessels. Russia’s influence upon the last-minute refusal by Ukraine’s former president, Viktor Yanukovich, to sign the Association Agreement with the EU went largely unmentioned. Official discourse confined itself to deploring the fact that Russia felt itself forced into a zero-sum competition with the EU, stressing instead the long-term economic benefits for Russia of Ukraine’s integration into the single market. Only Russia’s annexation of Crimea, and its resonance for European and international security architecture, forced a change of tone at the highest level.

¹ See E. Kaca, Z. Nowak, “More Sense than Sensibility: French Policy towards Russia under Hollande,” *PISM Bulletin*, no. 123 (576), 12 November 2013.

The growing threat of territorial destabilisation in the direct neighbourhood of both the EU and NATO has indeed given this crisis a clear security dimension, which pushed France to demonstrate strong support for its Central European Allies, not least through calling for immediate NATO strategic reassurances. Besides making its Airborne Warning and Control System available to patrol Polish and Romanian air space, four French fighter jets and about 70 soldiers arrived in Malbork in late April, with the two-fold purpose of supporting Poland's guard duty within the Baltic Air Policing programme, and further developing interoperability between the two countries' forces. As part of its comprehensive support, France also strengthened its cyber defence cooperation with the Baltic States.

Besides these efforts at reassurance, France favoured the exclusion of Russia from the G8 forum, and also played an active role in April's joint statement agreed in Geneva between the United States, the EU, Russia and Ukraine. The same month, France's foreign affairs minister, Laurent Fabius, travelled with his German counterpart Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Moldova, Georgia and Tunisia, and the German minister was then invited to participate in the French mid-May Council of Ministers. France also supported the first rounds of EU and U.S. low-level coordinated sanctions against Russia (a ban on travel and freezing of assets of Russian and Ukrainian officials), and suspended its bilateral military cooperation with Russia in March. Fabius finally conceded that, if Russia pursued its destabilising role, the Mistrals deal could be cancelled in the framework of a coordinated third European sanction package.

And a Softening. The economic pain entailed by a possible new round of U.S.-led sanctions, and the risk of a long-term deterioration in France's relations with Russia, have revealed strong divisions in France. French firms (Total, Danone, Renault, Safran) have joined the Franco-Russian Observatory in pressing the French government and public sphere to normalise bilateral relations. In the meantime, political figures from almost all political parties have publically attacked the government for its strong line on Russia. They include Jean-Pierre Chevènement (Parti Socialiste), François Fillon (Union pour un Mouvement Populaire), Marine Le Pen (Front National), and Jean-Luc Mélenchon (Front des Gauches). The government has also faced criticism for a policy line deemed excessively pro-American.

Hollande's confirmation that the two Mistrals-class vessels would be delivered in October and in mid-2015 as planned is an answer to these criticisms, and an attempt to reaffirm France's sovereign choices. No matter that Hollande had inherited the deal from his predecessors, nor that the Mistrals deal had already been criticised heavily by France's allies, both for its timing after the War in Georgia and for its potential impact on European security. The French government has pointed out to its foreign critics that "a contract is a contract," and that the Mistrals vessels (power-projection-type vessels that can carry 700 troops, 15 helicopters, 60 armoured vehicles, a hospital, a sizeable operational headquarters, 10 tanks, and as many amphibious vehicles) will be delivered unarmed to Russia.

D-Day Diplomacy. At the 70th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy, on June 6, Hollande facilitated a meeting between Putin and Ukraine's newly-elected president, Petro Poroshenko. While this effort at reaching a diplomatic solution to the crisis had the effect of reminding Europeans about the more positive aspects of Russia's place in European history (something likely to encourage a more emollient line from a Germany conscious of its historic responsibilities), the move obscured the core strategic questions related to the Mistrals deal, as well as giving an impression of France as some kind of mediator between the West and Russia. And yet the thinking behind the meeting was clear.

If this meeting were subsequently to be identified as a point of de-escalation, France would preserve its strategic relations with Russia, despite having demonstrated its support to its Central European Allies' calls for strengthened collective defence. A French success "where everyone else failed" would also dampen criticism of the Mistrals deal. By extension, France would escape the headaches linked to cancellation of the contract. Besides avoiding financial costs (for example, potentially 1,000 jobs lost, reimbursement of €1.2 billion, plus an estimated €1 billion compensation to Russia), it could also help to preserve France's reliability as a military equipment provider (in, for example, the ongoing multi-billion euro Rafale negotiations with India) and secure the financing of its already over-stretched Military Programming Law 2014–2019.

But France has not effected a clear turn-around in the crisis, and its wait-and-see diplomacy on the Mistrals deal remains on shaky grounds. If the situation in eastern Ukraine further deteriorates by the time of the delivery of the first vessel in October, the French line will be in crisis. As a central player in both the EU and NATO, France is expected to send a politically coherent signal that is in line with its own calls for greater EU-U.S. and intra-EU burden-sharing on security and defence issues. Not only does this incident indicate the strategic costs that derive from seeking to maintain a vibrant defence industry. It shows that a weakened France is tempted by the tropes of its historical Realpolitik—a reminder to its allies of its strategic autonomy beyond its participation in the EU and NATO.

Recommendations for Poland. Warsaw cannot openly isolate Paris on the Mistrals question without in turn jeopardising France's support for NATO reassurance measures. A softer and more constructive means of criticising Paris would be for Warsaw to lend its support to the recent, rather spurious, calls for EU and/or NATO to buy the Mistrals instead of Russia. It should also make clear that its quest for an increased NATO and U.S. presence on the Central European flank does not mean a decrease in its commitment to intra-EU solidarity, whether it is about France's needs in Africa or in terms of developing a rapid and autonomous EU response to crisis. By so doing, Poland should in parallel expect France's support at the September NATO summit in Cardiff, notably concerning a permanent NATO presence on Polish soil, and regular targeted defence and contingency planning. Warsaw should also look for ways to engage France in a much-needed review of the 2003 European security strategy in autumn this year, while promoting an overall reassessment of the EU's regional policy tools towards the eastern neighbourhood.