



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The Research and Studies Program of the United States Institute of Peace convened a meeting of American and French academic experts and policy practitioners to examine the French negotiating style. Focusing on the French approach to bilateral and multilateral relations, the animated discussion yielded useful insight into the French approach to international politics.

This event was part of the Institute's ongoing Cross-Cultural Negotiation Project, which develops and transmits useful knowledge for negotiating with foreign counterparts on matters affecting the prevention and management of international conflicts. Specifically, the project is designed to help negotiators better understand the negotiating behavior of their counterparts and thereby reach mutually satisfactory political solutions to issues that might otherwise escalate into confrontation. Thus far, the Institute has published studies on China, North Korea, and Russia, with additional studies on Japan and Germany under way.

The following report is a synthesis of the proceedings of the workshop on French negotiating behavior. While this report summarizes views expressed throughout the workshop, it should not be considered representative of attendees' positions on all matters.

This report was written by program officer Emily Metzgar. The Institute wishes to recognize Stephanie Cohn for her initial summary of the French negotiating behavior event held at the Institute in summer 2000. Special thanks to Charles Cogan of Harvard University and Institute fellow Jean-Marc Coicaud for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this report.

**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.**

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## French Negotiating Style

### Briefly...

- France has an official position on virtually every important international issue, but it lacks the influence to effectively promote its positions outside of Europe.
- France frequently challenges the United States, thus contributing to the French reputation as a spoiler in foreign affairs. Rather than simply accept American positions, France occasionally allows negotiations to fail and prefers to portray itself as independent from the United States.
- French governmental institutions and the domestic political environment impact French foreign policy. Roles of primary government actors, training of negotiators, and degree of public interest in international affairs are important factors influencing French negotiating behavior.
- France's international policy positions and negotiating behavior are often characterized as being principled and as bearing both a highly developed sense of history and the burden of being right. Manifestation of these characteristics varies with issue and context.
- Two case studies help illustrate French negotiating behavior. Analysis of French positions on several North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) issues as well as on United Nations Security Council decisions regarding Iraq offers useful insight into the French vision of its role in international affairs and how that view subsequently affects the French approach to policy negotiations.

### French-U.S. Relations

French negotiating style is examined here with emphasis on the bilateral relationship between the United States and France. Although their histories differ, France and the United States maintain similar perceptions of international responsibilities. France and the United States have been allies for over 200 years, yet in the last 60 years differences between the two have grown increasingly visible, workshop participants say. Despite the longevity of close relations, the bilateral relationship lacks "density." As a result, interactions between France and the United States in the international arena provide examples of French behavior in an environment where it believes it must work for everything it gets.

Although France and the United States are allies, most of the Cold War was marked by French efforts to find an alternative to the duality of the bipolar international system. Friction remains a constant part of bilateral relations, although history has proven France to be a good ally in times of crisis.

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE

The United States Institute of Peace is an independent, nonpartisan federal institution created by Congress to promote research, education, and training on the prevention, management, and resolution of international conflicts. Established in 1984, the Institute meets its congressional mandate through an array of programs, including research grants, fellowships, professional training programs, conferences and workshops, library services, publications, and other educational activities. The Institute's Board of Directors is appointed by the President of the United States and confirmed by the Senate.

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The entrenchment of the U.S.-dominated international system in the post-Cold War era has led to more frequent tension between the two countries. Divisions over Middle East policies and competition over the direction of European security are representative of disagreements between France and the United States.

The French rankle under American leadership in the international arena. Believing that the United States too often fails to genuinely consult with its European allies, France frequently challenges the United States, contributing to the French reputation as a spoiler in international affairs. France seeks international legitimacy by adopting positions in opposition to the United States. It prefers not to passively accept American positions or American unilateralism, but rather to achieve its ends by occasionally allowing negotiations to fail or by making what it perceives as an independent decision rather than acting out of loyalty to the United States.

The strength of France's economy, the French nuclear deterrent, France's role in peacekeeping and military interventions, its residual interests in Africa and elsewhere, and the continuing attraction that France has to the Third World as a land of political asylum all contribute to its high international profile. These factors also justify French participation in major international institutions such as the G-8 (the Group of Eight leading industrialized nations) and the United Nations, where it is a permanent member of the Security Council. Such membership ensures interaction with the United States and a place at the global decision-making table.

Like the United States, France has an official position on virtually every international issue. Yet France lacks the influence and resources to effectively promote its positions in the international arena outside of Europe. It is within this context that France maneuvers to retain its independence in international affairs. The rest of this report provides examples of French negotiating behavior in different contexts and attempts to draw general conclusions about the French approach to cross-cultural negotiations.

## Institutional Imperatives

French governmental institutions and the country's political environment have a large impact on French foreign policy. The role of the president and the nature of the French parliament are important institutional factors influencing French negotiating behavior, according to workshop participants.

The French constitution is ambiguous in assigning responsibility for foreign affairs to either the president or the prime minister. In spite of this, presidents of the Fifth Republic have successfully reserved for themselves primary responsibility for defense and foreign policy issues. Nevertheless, the prime minister maintains a role in foreign affairs, attending European Union and G-8 summits with the president. To avoid damage resulting from any public disagreement on foreign policy issues, the prime minister typically plays a less forward role in such forums. However, when the president and the prime minister are from different parties (a situation known as "cohabitation"), differences on foreign policy issues can be a source of tension within the government.

Unlike the U.S. Congress, which has authority to ratify or reject international treaties, the French parliament lacks the authority to veto presidential foreign policy priorities. The French president thus has great leeway in international affairs, without fear of parliamentary micro-management. In difficult negotiations it is not uncommon for the French president to provide direct guidance to the negotiating team, behavior which is highly unlikely from a U.S. president except on the most sensitive of issues.

French public opinion is an important variable influencing that country's negotiating behavior. This can be particularly enlightening with respect to the United Nations. The UN is not a matter of much public concern in France and there is no polarization on UN issues like there is in the United States. This has given France flexibility on United Nations issues that the United States has not had, especially in forums like the UN

Security Council. France can be more flexible than the United States because it lacks many of the domestic restraints that force U.S. positions. French behavior on Iraq provides a good example of this (see below).

France forms tactical alliances in the United Nations and elsewhere on various issues because it realizes it cannot always carry issues alone. This is common on economic issues and within the UN. France focuses on issues and regions where it has a history and can make a difference, as in the Middle East and Africa. As a result, it sometimes bumps up against the United States, causing tension. France takes a leading role where others have abdicated it, such as on Rwanda.

Compared to training for American foreign service officers and other government officials, the French program of training and education is far more homogenous. This training of foreign policy practitioners affects French negotiating behavior. The French educational system remains intrinsically elitist, and many national advisers have graduated from either the National Administration School, L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques, or L'Ecole Polytechnique. It is common for French diplomats, particularly ambassadors, to descend from the aristocracy. These are generalizations, and the truths on which they are based are evolving. The direct impact of these factors is difficult to measure, but the training and personal characteristics of French negotiators cannot be discounted as potentially important variables when explaining France's negotiating behavior.

## French Behavior in Practice

French international policy positions and negotiating behavior are often seen to have three primary characteristics. The first characteristic is principle. Last year, for example, the French decided that on principle they would not sign the Warsaw Democracy Summit's final declaration, "Towards a Common Democracy," because it was not an accurate portrayal of the French definition of democracy and because France believed it provided too great a forum for American-led globalization. Although French interests would not have been damaged by signing, principle was paramount.

The second characteristic is France's highly developed sense of history. The idea that there has been a change in France's international position since World War II remains undigested and there is constant reference to history—a fact that frequently offends France's European neighbors. While the United States is seen as unilateralist and hegemonic in its diplomacy, French bargaining positions often result from failure to adjust to the postwar reality that French influence in the world has been greatly diminished. France has a long tradition of being involved in international affairs and this is a role it is unwilling to relinquish.

Finally, there is the "burden of being right." Although the French government's positions frequently have merit, France lacks the influence to implement them. Despite often public disagreements on policy issues, U.S. officials acknowledge that the French position in some cases is the right one, especially when it pertains to regions in which France has a great deal of experience, such as sub-Saharan Africa or the Middle East. In these cases, the United States adopts the French position because it is thought to be the right one, not because France has the power to force acceptance of its views.

Some also argue that French foreign policy is accepting of ambiguity in particular situations. France's reaction to the crisis in Yugoslavia illustrates this point. Until 1995, France, like most other European countries, believed it should not take sides. When international opinion hardened in one direction, France then followed suit. Formulation of policy toward Iraq is another example. The French are opposed to most, if not all, sanctions against Iraq. As was once articulated by a French ambassador, "France does not believe in the concept of rogue states, but would rather speak of rogue regimes." France seeks political solutions rather than military ones and prefers individual relations to the "bloc" approach of the Cold War era.

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In France, a small group of officials arrives at bargaining positions. The United States, on the other hand, negotiates with itself first—through interagency and intragovernmental debates—sometimes for weeks. This results in inflexible U.S. positions. Despite their flexibility, the French take language more seriously than most Americans. They do so perhaps as the result of what one scholar has identified as the conflict between French abstractionism and American pragmatism. As a global power, the United States can ultimately decide to relent on language without feeling it has lost anything of importance. The French are more likely to take a hard line and not concede until they have no option but to back off. When misused, such tactics can damage France's ability to attain its strategic goals.

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## Two Case Studies

Two case studies illustrate the nature of French negotiating behavior with the United States and within multilateral institutions. These cases relate to NATO and the United Nations.

### *France and NATO*

Discussion indicated that analyzing French positions on NATO can yield broader insights into that country's negotiating behavior. Consideration of a new Strategic Concept for NATO, leadership of its Southern Command, and alliance expansion highlights characteristics of French negotiating behavior on a subject of importance not only to France and the United States, but to all members of the transatlantic community. The debates of the 1990s are most instructive for those negotiating with the French over the relationship between NATO and the European Union's proposed Rapid Reaction Force.

The French are often more aggressive and confrontational than other European negotiators, say workshop participants. France attaches importance to language and political issues, and will fight long and hard to attain its objectives. In general, the French will take a slightly extreme position and stick to it until the last moment, before relenting at the end to demonstrate flexibility. Other countries get nervous if issues are not settled in advance of a summit. In the words of one observer, "They take issues hostage and do this until late in the game and turn it into a game of chicken." The French seem to regard the potential dangers of being isolated as worth it. They fight hard for perceived interests and do not apologize for it.

When debate over NATO's Southern Command arose in the mid-1990s the French pushed for a European to hold the leadership position. Negotiations on this subject were overseen at the highest levels of French government. President Jacques Chirac wrote two letters to President Bill Clinton, one including a personal plea for help in appointing a European commander. President Clinton opposed it, eliminating the possibility of future discussion. With the decision already made at the highest level, the French were out of options. With a different approach, France might have been able to retain some bargaining power.

In opening Strategic Concept discussions, the United States wanted to clarify the role of NATO for the next 50 years. The fundamental question was NATO's strategic and political purpose. This was a debate about the United Nations and whether NATO needed a UN mandate in order to act. The French wanted to be specific that NATO needed the UN mandate in order to act. The American standpoint was that NATO is the institution-of-choice for joint U.S.-European efforts on collective defense and crisis management. The United States sought fewer restrictions on potential roles for NATO, and the Europeans, France in particular, worked to prevent the mandate from being too open-ended. This was consistent with previous French positions on NATO that opposed expansion of the alliance's role for fear of increased American influence via the command structure. In this

case, the language met all U.S. requirements but had been massaged to such an extent by the French that the only truly accurate reading was one that read between the lines and recognized the importance of what was said as much as what was not.

Regarding NATO enlargement, France was not initially enthusiastic about expansion. When it became clear that enlargement would happen, however, France did not try to block it but, rather, worked to influence which countries would be admitted. France took a maximalist position. When it was decided that just three countries (Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary) would be admitted, France was willing to concede, but made sure it got something for the trouble. France insisted on strong forward-leading language on Romania, a harbinger, perhaps, to the next round of debates over NATO enlargement with the Bush administration.

Any summary of French negotiating behavior with respect to NATO must stress the importance placed on clarity of position, the emphasis on pushing for that position until it is either accepted or is no longer viable, and the effort made to ensure that France does not leave the bargaining table without gaining something for its trouble.

### ***The United Nations and Iraq***

French behavior with respect to the United Nations and Iraq is instructive especially for understanding different components of the French approach to international diplomacy. France recognizes the value of working in a multilateral context to constrain the behavior of more powerful nations. The French are also skilled at developing a multifaceted approach to complex problems. The results can be an irritant to relations with other countries, particularly the United States, but there is a degree of begrudging respect for French willingness to identify its true interests and to pursue them without hesitation.

In the post-Cold War era, being a permanent member of the UN Security Council and having veto power is one of the last real measures of international influence. The multilateral nature of the United Nations creates an opportunity for members. For many nations, the challenge is getting the United States to be subject to the rules of that body. The French have a strategy to maximize their international leverage in this context. France believes that its leverage is maximized if the superpower is forced to abide by Security Council resolutions and the rules of the institution, rather than being free to pursue its own interests unilaterally. On Iraq, France maneuvered to keep the issue within the confines of the Security Council. France fought efforts that threatened to move the field of discussion into different realms, particularly ones in which the United States would have a leading role.

The French approach to certain issues, including some within the purview of the Security Council, is “mirved,” with multiple positions aimed at creating diplomatic flexibility. This has been true with respect to Iraq and UN sanctions. On one hand, the French want to be close to the Iraqis to understand and represent Iraqi views. At the same time, however, the French are also interested in understanding the American, British, and Russian perspectives so they can represent those to the Iraqis, thus enhancing leverage.

Many characterize this as a “shrewd and effective approach” that has put the French in the position of competing with the Russians for influence in Baghdad. Recognizing this, the Iraqis have occasionally played the French against the Russians to see who could deliver the most. This example illustrates the complexity of the French position. More often than not, Americans see things in black-and-white, bilateral terms, while the French view is variable and ultimately more flexible.

With respect to UNSCOM (United Nations Special Commission) in particular, France was interested in supporting UNSCOM from the beginning. The French government provided experts and material support and participated fully. France wanted to be involved in the program both multilaterally and bilaterally with the major capitals in the region, including Baghdad. In the early 1990s, France also participated in the no-fly zones on reconnaissance missions and even in some of the retaliatory strikes on Iraq until the spring of

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1993. As a result of this extensive participation, France was in a good position to evaluate the direction of the UN Security Council's Iraq policies and was willing to revise the extent of its involvement depending on its judgment of the situation's evolution.

The French position on the issue of Iraq was pragmatic. French government officials at the time suggested that France dealt with states and not regimes, thus sidestepping debate about interaction with Saddam Hussein. Questioned about matters of principle concerning Hussein, the French took cover under the mantle of pragmatism, arguing that difficult situations needed to be handled pragmatically. U.S.-French disagreement on Iraq is not typical of the two countries' relations in the United Nations. In the United Nations, the United States and France vote together 90 percent of the time. The exception to this concerns the Middle East, where voting coincidence on those issues is only one-third. For the United States and France there are fundamental differences on definition of interests and issue perception, and those spilled over into Iraq policy.

Related examples illustrate these differences on Middle East policy equally well. When UNSCOM evacuated Iraq in December 1998 for the last time, the United States and Britain initiated a limited bombing campaign. The Security Council wanted to avoid failure and sought a way out, believing that if UNSCOM could not change Iraq's behavior, then the institution itself should be dismantled. Both the Russians and the British drafted resolutions that would supplant UNSCOM with a new organization that could change the Security Council's relations with Iraq. The French wanted a position distinct from each proposal. At the same time they were negotiating with the British on their proposal, they were also supporting the Russian proposal. The French had their own position but also had a foot in both of the other camps. This maximized their ability to affect the outcome in a rather shrewd way. The French saw that the U.S. position was so fixed that there was room for this kind of maneuvering.

At that time, there was no unified point of view in Paris, and this fact may have contributed to changes in the French position. President Chirac and his office kept close control of decisions, but there were other strong voices with varying points of view, including commercial interests, military concerns, the prime minister's office, and the foreign ministry. French policy was not always arrived at neatly or quickly. When the United States sought support from France, there could be enthusiasm in the component parts but this would not be reflected ultimately in official positions. This approximated American dynamics in arriving at negotiating positions and demonstrated a different characteristic of French negotiating behavior. These examples showcase the pragmatic nature of French negotiating behavior.

## Conclusion

Principles and pragmatism both have a place in French negotiating behavior. How and when these characteristics present themselves is the result of complex international dynamics, the dominant role of the United States in the international arena within which France operates, and a seeming sense of nostalgia for the days of great French power. The realities of France's international position lead the French to adopt bargaining tactics that seek to maximize their influence, often frustrating their interlocutors and sometimes resulting in unsuccessful negotiations even with friends and allies.

The difficulty with which the United States negotiates with France has become almost a cliché in international politics. In the U.S. view, the French have developed a reputation for being difficult partners in times of peace, yet reliable allies in times of crisis. With better understanding of French motivations in the conduct of international affairs, the United States and other interlocutors can work more constructively with France, ensuring cooperative, multidimensional relations in both bad times and good.



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