French NATO policy under François Hollande

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Foreign and defence policies will be key issues for the new French president François Hollande who was elected on May 6, 2012, although they did not play a large role in the election campaign. The three-hour debate between the two final candidates held between the first and second rounds of voting spent only fifteen minutes on these issues. Nevertheless, Hollande’s first international political appearance was at the NATO Summit two days after his official investiture. The proposal for the withdrawal of French combat troops from Afghanistan before the end of the year was a momentous foreign policy proposal and made it clear that questions need to be asked about the French transatlantic and NATO policies which will be conducted by the new Socialist president.

First and foremost, France’s allies have to keep in mind that the decision to withdraw French troops from Afghanistan should not be considered as the flagship of future French transatlantic policy. This proposal has been very popular amongst the French public, who do not favour waging war in a far-off theatre. Hollande could announce the earlier withdrawal without reducing the security level within Afghanistan, whether for the Afghans or for allies, since the French commitment was clearly lower than that of the rest of the global forces present in Afghanistan, particularly the US forces. The key questions, thus, remain linked to the transition scheduled for 2014 and the political future of this country.

**Historical overview**

To understand better the debate around NATO in France we have to take into account the historical facts of the country. When General De Gaulle decided to withdraw France from the NATO military command in 1966, his reasons were political as well as military: the main objective being to allow France to keep its deterrence doctrine independent rather than linked to the flexible response doctrine of the Americans. It was also a sort of “Ost politik”. France wanted to be the ally able to maintain talks with the USSR as well as to prevent the involvement of developed countries in the Cold War. This policy was endorsed by three different presidents: General De Gaulle who could be termed a social conservative, the liberal Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, and Socialist François Mitterrand. France, however, remained a strong ally and proved its loyalty during such episodes as the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1979 Iranian crisis (American hostages held at the US embassy in Tehran) and the Euro-missile crisis (the NATO “double decision” to launch disarmament talks with the USSR whilst deploying new nuclear weapons in Europe in response to Moscow’s previously deployed SS 20 nuclear missiles in the region) in the early 1980s. Each time, France strongly supported the American president and NATO, sometimes offering even greater support than those countries who remained part of NATO’s military command.

Things changed after the Cold War ended. NATO did not shoot one bullet during the Cold War or use force to end it. Although it was involved in the Balkan crisis, it was not so easy for France to be integrated into military operations as it did not belong to the military structure. During the Kosovo crisis, France had to admit that it could not influence military operations’ planning and had to resolve the discrepancy in bombing planning during the meetings of the North Atlantic Council (NAC). During the 1990s, in order to overcome these difficulties,
France rejoined many structures. Before the full reintegration in 2009, France wasn’t included in the following three structures: the defence planning committee, the nuclear planning group (NPG), and the integrated military command. However, as France wanted to keep its independent deterrence, it did not join the NPG in 2009.

One can say that it was not such a huge step for France to be fully reintegrated, but France knows from its allies’ point of view that it was a clear proof of French commitment to NATO.

From a French perspective, it was also a symbolic decision. Over the last 25 years, France has tried to make European defence a key political objective. The logical evolution of the European Union would encompass a common foreign policy including a defence pillar. This aim was finally achieved with the signature of the 1991 Maastricht treaty that was initiated by a Franco-German agreement, demonstrating France’s strong desire to build a European defence policy. During the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, critics believed that France wanted to build up the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) against NATO. This unfounded statement was the result of France’s fear that NATO would hinder the development of the CSDP, thus generating a misunderstanding of the French position.

Consequently, Nicolas Sarkozy could argue that being fully reintegrated into NATO could be a pre-condition for strengthening the CSDP, since France’s partners would then no longer consider the French policy as a means of acting against NATO.

**Socialist Party and NATO-reintegration**

In 2009, the French Socialist Party disagreed with the decision to reintegrate into the NATO military structure. Although President François Mitterrand (1989-1995) and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin (1997-2002) had paved the way for France to be reintegrated into some of the NATO structures, their intentions were only to make the coordination of military operations easier since these required a better knowledge and understanding of NATO procedures; their goal was not to become “NATO aligned”. The Socialist Party raised three major objections to reintegration.

First, reintegration was considered as a symbol of alignment with the United States. Even if the reintegration was taking place at the beginning of Barack Obama’s presidency, we cannot forget the intensity of the French desire to remain independent, especially when the USA is the only superpower. In 2009, Bush’s second term had just ended, and the decision taken by Chirac not to join in the 2003 Iraq war had left the French traumatized. Although the decision taken in 2003 not to get involved in the Iraqi conflict had not be an easy one to make, the future proved that President Chirac had been right not to follow the United States into this conflict since there were no WMD, as its intelligence services had informed French leaders. Thus, from a French point of view, there is a need to be able to counter the American will when necessary.

Second, there were doubts about the future of the CSDP. If there was a consensus agreeing that France’s reintegrating completely into NATO would mean that its partners would no longer judge its CSDP efforts as anti-NATO, there was still a risk that France’s return within NATO would be interpreted as a France abandoning its interest in the CSDP.
Finally, the other fear was linked to the cost effectiveness of the measure. France has to provide about 1,000 military officers to the military command structure, hence a cost of about €80 million per year. In other words: it was a very high price for an uncertain outcome.

Before the presidential election, the Socialist Party had to take a stand regarding NATO. The left wing of the party wanted France to leave the military command structure whereas the more pro-Atlantic side fully agreed with Sarkozy’s decision. Finally, the official position taken at the party’s national convention in October 2010 included both views. The text was adopted unanimously. It stated that in the case of a Socialist victory, the future president would conduct an assessment of the reintegration into the military command structure to decide on France’s position within NATO. During a televised debate on 15 March 2012, François Hollande specified that he would ask for an enhanced presence within the military structure as well as significant progress with regard to European defence as conditions for France maintaining its presence in the NATO military command.

**Hollande and NATO**

**Questions**

In fact, nobody believes that François Hollande will decide to leave the NATO military command. The questions asked by the French president are not easy ones: how can France have more influence within NATO, and how can France change the mantra of European security and defence policy which is not very positive today?

One of the answers is encapsulated in a question asked by Daniel Keohane in an article published on the FRIDE blog on 18 April 2012 ‘Without French leadership, is EU defence policy dead?’

The answer to Daniel Keohane’s question is clearly “no”. The key issue today is not that France is more invested in NATO, it is the fact that it is less invested in the CSDP. In other words, France lacked enthusiasm for the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), and a European operational Headquarters for the EU, although these were suggestions made by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg since 2003. There was also no real support for the European Defence Agency, created in 2004.

The new president clearly said he will act in order to make progress with regard to the CSDP. But the question is, how to do it? At the moment, the new president has not yet detailed his strategy.

The issue around French NATO policy is different. From an American point of view, the issue is “Will France be fully involved in NATO in the future?” From a French angle, the question is “is it possible to have more influence in NATO”? But the real question is “what could be the role of NATO in the future, and what is the French view of NATO’s future?” Officially, the French position is to assert that NATO is a military organization and not a political one. An honest translation of the French view of NATO could be as follows: “we don’t want NATO to play a wider role than it currently does, and we don’t want anything resembling a global NATO”. But the real problem for France is not to know what it does not want, but to define what it does want from NATO. Before its reintegration within the military command
structure, France was known as the country who said “no”. The general feeling in France since then is rather that it is now impossible to say anything but “yes”.

As a result, François Hollande has to be a more “proactive” president than Nicolas Sarkozy was. France has to define a new NATO policy in order to be a responsible ally and not a passive one. To define this new policy, France has to address numerous issues.

**NATO and UN**

First, what are the respective roles of NATO and the United Nations? Saying that “NATO is the most successful alliance in the world history” is an assertion that certainly suits NATO members, but such a claim may be less appreciated by non-NATO members since there is no identified enemy of NATO today. If NATO wants to be a universal organization, it must move forward and clearly distinguish missions encompassed in the 5th article from other actions to avoid misunderstandings. France could bring its diplomatic experience gained during the 43 years between 1966 and 2009 when it was not inside the NATO military command and use it to serve as a bridge between different civilizations or to organize common security with other regional security organizations. When NATO gets involved in peacekeeping and peace-security-building operations, it must operate more closely with the United Nations to enjoy greater support from the international community.

The new French president will also have to scrutinize NATO’s partnership policy. Partnership is a good thing when it supports the democratization of a country’s army or security sector reform (SSR). But partnership must not be an “alternative enlargement policy” or a way to increase NATO’s influence, in other words, a sort of “global NATO bis” policy. Finally, there is the issue of the NATO comprehensive approach to operations. With regard to the concept itself, everybody tends to agree. However, from a concrete angle, things are different. The NATO strategy in Afghanistan is not truly a NATO strategy but one led by the USA. 65 per cent of the troops on the field are American, and the effectiveness of the counterinsurgency strategy has not been demonstrated. This is the case before 2014 and could well be the case after that date. What could the new French president do to have greater influence on this key issue?

**NATO and CSDP**

Second, France has to tackle the issue of the respective roles of NATO and the CSDP. Of the 28 NATO members, 21 belong to the European Union. The lack of capabilities identified during the Libyan crisis can be traced to European inability. Pooling and sharing – ‘smart defence’ - are good initiatives. France should nonetheless be cautious. If NATO were to become a simple mutual safety assurance organization, the risk would be that only countries with the most extensive capabilities such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France would be able to provide NATO with mutual military capabilities to assist member countries. ‘Smart defence’ mustn’t be synonymous with a lack of national responsibility regarding involvement in financing defence and security assets.

Thus, one of the initiatives of the new French president could be to make suggestions to structure the complementarity between NATO and the CSDP by paying attention to the need for European countries to be more involved in their security. One of the solutions could be to organize the pooling and sharing initiatives to obtain more direct involvement of
European countries in their defence. In this case, France could suggest two rules. The first rule could be to prioritize the EU initiatives over the NATO ones since the lack of capabilities is more a European problem than an American one. By doing this, European countries will be forced to enhance their military capabilities instead of being dependent on the USA. Moreover, France mustn’t forget it needs to build a coherent EU capability in accordance with NATO capabilities. As part of the EU initiatives, France also has to prioritize pooling and sharing initiatives with two or three countries, following the example of the Franco-British cooperation, specifically to initiate new armament programs which could encourage the other European countries. In terms of concrete engagement and in terms of capacity to manage armament programs, it is best to have fully involved countries with rules of financing under which the costs fall only on countries who participate in a specific program.

Maybe François Hollande can try to give new impetus to the Lisbon Treaty Permanent Cooperating Structure by replacing its initial objective with a new, more pertinent one. Reaching this new objective could lead to the implementation of a new framework favourable to the pooling and sharing initiatives and thus ensuring full involvement of member states in this initiative, which would also strengthen the role of the European Defence Agency.

French proposals to improve European capabilities and thus to advance the CSDP will contribute to have better capabilities within NATO in accordance with the philosophy of ‘smart defence’.

Beyond “yes” versus “no”

The newly elected French president will most certainly insist on the necessity to have a European Operational Headquarters (OHQ) that doesn’t duplicate NATO operational planning.

Therefore, President Hollande is facing a great challenge. He has to define a policy regarding NATO generated by the merger of the policies of De Gaulle and Sarkozy. It is time for the new president to escape from the dilemma of choosing only between saying “no” and saying “yes” and to promote a French/European vision that will shape the future of NATO. The current issue appears to be slightly different from the old debate between the European pillar in NATO versus the CSDP even if it is useful to have a more concrete organization of European countries within NATO.

François Hollande made a step in this direction during the NATO Summit in Chicago. As he had promised to withdraw French troops from Afghanistan, discussing the future strategy of NATO was a real challenge. One should think that France will have other opportunities to tackle this subject in the next few months. With regard to Ballistic Missile Defence, Hollande expressed his concerns about the link between Ballistic Missile Defence and deterrence, political control, involvement of French industry and about the cost and rules of funding of the program. Thus, it appears to be the first example of his intention to go beyond the old French dilemma of being limited to saying “yes” versus saying “no” within NATO.

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