

Having Tea in Warsaw When Your Spirit is in Bamako

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This paper intends to explore the reasons why France, which officially seemed to yield to American pressure concerning a greater military involvement in the East, finally limited its collaboration to a polite speech. The reason is simply to be found in the necessity for François Hollande to regain popularity. In order to strike the French imagination, a light and colourful epic in the desert would be much more efficient than any homage to NATO, the queen of defeats.

1. The Reintegration of France into a Multinational Alliance as an Historical Exception

Despite being a founding member of NATO (1949), France regularly criticized its American military leadership. Criticisms of US dominance would eventually lead General de Gaulle to leave NATO's integrated military command in 1966. From the 1990's onwards, however, France did not oppose the extension of NATO despite the collapse of the Soviet threat. The French military was reintegrated in 2009 during the presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy. When François Hollande was elected president on May 15, 2012, he inherited this new situation. His generals were however conscious that the military alliances to which France participated over the centuries were, in 85% of the cases, bilateral treaties. Their efficiency was not proportional to their morality: for example, the unnatural union between the 'lily flower' and the 'crescent' had lasted between 1536 and 1799, because of the rational interests of the two parties. They also knew that a military agreement encountering the strong hostility of the General Staff was always liable to fail. For example, the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance of May 2, 1935, - confronted with the incomprehension of the general officers - was never applied. Alliances with more than two partners are relatively rare in France: they have generally included between three and eight members and have not lasted in time¹. Most of these alliances had very limited effects. In any case, they did not survive the limited objective they set for themselves². The reintegration of France into NATO

¹ We can quote here the Triple Alliance concluded at The Hague on January 4, 1717, between the United Provinces, Great Britain, and France, the Family Pact signed on August 15, 1761, at the instigation of the Duke of Choiseul, between the Kings of France, Spain and the Duke of Parma, the quintuple alliance formed at the congress of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818, the eight-nation alliance which crushed the Boxer revolt in 1900, the triple agreement that bound France, the United Kingdom and Imperial Russia in 1892, and finally NATO, which is an exception because of the disproportionate number of its members.

² Paradoxically, even if the multinational alliances do not have a high military efficiency, they can be very advantageous as long as the war has not broken out. Let us remember, for example, the Franco-Indian alliance, which bound France to the various Amerindian nations. This enabled the French and the Indians to form a haven of peace in the middle Ohio valley before the conflict broke out and ruined the French ambitions.

thus ran contrary to a long tradition of political and military independence. Now the only territory where France could still act on its own was obviously Africa. The generals knew it and the Foreign Legion and Maritime infantry lobbies encouraged this strategic orientation.

2. French Perceptions of Russia's Future and Its Policy Towards It

Even though they seldom express themselves on the subject, French diplomats cultivate a taste for *Grand Strategy*. They are obviously conscious that the global player which could replace the old oceanic and liberal American engine will be a Sino-Indian double-factory, supplied with oil, raw materials and food by Russia, the Middle East and Africa. The 'Indo-Buddhist plant' will therefore be mainly nourished by its orthodox and Muslim energy peripheries. Of course, Russia will be willing to avoid at all costs being reduced to the rank of *hinterland*. In this context, the strategic goals of Russia can be broken down into eight objectives: 1. It must balance its relations between India and China and get closer to these two factories thanks to its fuel, road and rail infrastructures, 2. It must be present in the Middle East in order to control upstream hydrocarbon flows, 3. Russia must be careful to balance imports between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It must also come to terms with these competing energy pools – as far as the price of oil is concerned, 4. Russia must prevent the supply of the factories by territories competing with its own resources. It could cause trouble in these countries, 5. Russia has an interest in promoting European fragmentation in order to facilitate its policy of influence with variable geometry, 6. It must embody an authoritative and stable alternative political counter-model and make sure that its *Caesarism* crystallizes the fantasies of European conservatives, 7. Russia has interest in getting closer to Arabia in order to bring the coup de grace to the dollar, 8. It must avoid its own deindustrialization to the benefit of the industrial heart. Russia must finally avoid its demographic weakening by the human-rich factory. It could thus try to capture uprooted western European migrants in search of stability after repeated terrorist attacks.

Contemporary French politicians are very conscious that the military aristocracies of France, the Holy German Empire, and Russia – which have deep political and social common features - have been historically defeated by the slow ascent of an alternative model embodied by the Dutch, British and later American maritime republics. The merchants have thus defeated the Knights. When one considers the organisations of these two social and political models we could also say that Aristotle has defeated Plato. Aristotle has given birth to liberalism, a world order which is currently in agony. The following idea has thus emerged: the tide could be changing; a different future could appear before our eyes. According to certain French academic studies, Russia will have strengthened its internal coherence by 2030, reconnecting to its own identity. This identity had been defined by Lieutenant Pascal in his speech *The Russian Soul by a Latin* with three characters: solidarity, indeterminacy and the trend towards the absolute. These three characters are opposed to the evolutions of Western Europe, marked by the triumph of individualism, technicism and the rejection of the spiritual dimension. The *sobornost*, is one

of the great concepts by which Russia intends to differentiate itself from the West, always accused of excess of rationalism and individualism. *Narodnost* refers to the national and popular spirit, while the *sobornost* is the unitary spirit. Russia is also marked by a living disorder. In reality, a regime of foreign civilization has been imposed on it since Peter the Great. This explains its fatalism, its resignation, its creed in the uselessness of the effort. The third characteristic is its taste for utopia. In 2030, Russia will have not only revived its identity, it will have also succeeded in breaking its perceived encirclement by the United States. Russia will encourage the secession of the most dynamic regions that concentrate Russian-speaking minorities. With Transnistria for Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Georgia and Crimea for Ukraine, three potential European Union states will have been considerably weakened. In addition, Belarus ("White Russia") and Russia, which are already forming a customs union, will have merged. This situation will provide Russia with a buffer zone of considerable strategic depth that will allow it to keep its distance from the European Union. In 2030, Ukraine will have regained its place of 'territorial matrix' of the Slavic world, under the protection of Russia. Indeed, the active lobbying of countries such as Greece, Hungary, Slovakia or Austria will have encouraged larger European states to adopt a more measured position vis-à-vis Russia, especially as many *incidents* will have made it possible to show the reality of the very undemocratic doctrinal foundations of Ukrainian nationalism. Abandoned by Washington on the one hand, and by the European Union on the other, Ukraine, amputated from its eastern part will experience a serious economic crisis that will force it to accept the help of Russia. The situation of Russia will thus be stabilized in the West and in the Caucasus. Russia will however face a strong Chinese migratory pressure in Siberia. Hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers will have crossed the Amur River to settle in Russia where their cheap labour will be used to revive the old abandoned kolkhozes and develop the industry.

Benefiting from fundamental reforms, Russia will reconfigure itself defensively around the northern seaway. The reorganization of the maritime traffic will not be without impact on the geopolitics of Eurasia. The rise of the Northeast route will be the indirect consequence of global warming. Indeed, the Northeastern route across the Bering Strait is usually paralyzed by Arctic sea ice. The accelerated melting of pack ice had begun to open a passage between the Arctic and Siberia from July to September in the 2000s. During the 2010's, the passage had become free from the end of June to mid-November. With the acceleration of global warming in the 2020s, the five months of navigation will be gradually extended to seven possible months from May to November, depending on ice drift. The traffic of Chinese container ships will rush into the gap that saves 15 days of sailing compared to the Suez route. China's traffic through the Northeast will have risen from 15% in 2020 to 30% in 2030. Northeast traffic, formerly confined to the transport of oil, gas, ores or frozen fish, will have been extended to containerships that carry all types of goods in containers. Nuclear-powered icebreakers will secure the route taken by the convoy of Chinese ships and open the road. The Russians will thus have benefited from the opening of the Northeast route by offering to rent their nuclear-powered Russian icebreakers

to the Chinese. However, tensions will have gradually appeared. In effect, the Chinese will now use their modern icebreakers -the snow-dragons - taking a road further north, beyond the 200 nautical miles of Russian territorial waters. Chinese ships will thus avoid paying taxes and rental fees to the Russian icebreakers. Despite the dangerous nature of the route because of drifting ice, intense cold, dense fog, the scarcity of navigational aids and damage, Chinese ships will now be tempting the adventure. The melting of the Arctic sea ice will allow the Russians to create Siberian bases for the exploitation of hydrocarbon deposits and ores. Maritime transport in the Arctic Ocean will therefore have become very profitable to supply their bases in the Kara Sea or to transport their raw materials. The Russians will have completed the expansion of the port of Murmansk in 2015. They will equip it with a container and coal terminal, an oil terminal and a pipeline. The many resources of the Kola peninsula (platinum, gold, cobalt, iron, copper and nickel) will now be exported to China by sea route or to inland Russia by rail. For their part, the Norwegians will develop the port of Kirkenes, located 200 kilometres from Murmansk, to try to capture some of the maritime trade. Kirkenes will allow Chinese and European container ships to improve the transit of Chinese goods and multiply travels in the Arctic Ocean, maximizing the use of vessels with reinforced hulls in the most favourable navigation period. Iceland and Scotland will also be trying to develop their ports in deep water in order to capture the crumbs of Arctic trade. Under US pressure, Canada will also embark on a *Northwest Passage project*. But the passage will only be possible in 2050. Among the major powers, Russia will have drawn the greater benefits from the opening of the new Northeast Seaway. In Western Europe, Russian cultural centres will now select qualified asylum seekers to send them to the University of St. Petersburg. By 2030, the Russian Federation will gather about 150 million inhabitants.

Obviously, French studies on the future of Russia³, which differed from those of the US and other NATO members, was not necessarily the only factor shaping the less aggressive approach to Moscow. From 2014 onwards, François Hollande simply had no choice: his very low popularity necessitated an immediate military success in order to modify his public image. In this respect, his actions vis-a-vis NATO were not expected to generate sufficient media attention and would therefore be of little use politically. It was much more efficient to play on the half-buried French colonial dream and launch an operation in Africa. At least – and despite the essential but discrete American logistical support – Hollande could create the impression that France was *great once again*.

3. Mali: The First Military Challenge to the Detriment of France's Eastern Involvement

Operation *Serval* marks a significant shift into the French foreign policy in Africa: thanks to the support of the African States, the U.S. reluctance to intervene directly and the Chinese quest for energetic safety,

³ Thomas Flichy de La Neuville and Gregor Mathias, *The world in 2030, what the CIA had not imagined*, Bernard Giovanangeli, 2015

France had been able to intervene in order to prevent the destabilization of a strategic region. In a context marked simultaneously by the aging of certain materials and the hazardous reduction of its prepositioned forces, the French army had proved an exceptionally responsive tool. It had leant upon very sophisticated means of surveillance and a fine cultural knowledge of the area in order to ensure the freedom of the singular sea that is the desert. However, had the early military success been transformed into a political achievement? This was difficult to ascertain given that no political aims had been set. Moreover, the ethnic and religious questions had not been dealt with. The early organisation of elections, at a time where Mali was not yet stabilised, had not proved a success. It had merely consecrated the predominance of the southern majority over the northern minorities. Let us not forget that the Sahel is an old area of confrontation between the nomadic and sedentary populations. One year after the French intervention and despite the military efforts at stabilisation, the situation remained politically unstable.

For the French Army, several lessons could be drawn from Operation Serval. The troops were not prepared for the heat. The maps, dating back from the colonial era had to be updated. The use of aerial photos was precious in order to fill in the gaps. The distance between the units was very important. Given the number of soldiers involved and the vastness of the country, it was difficult to hold the ground. The cooperation with the African forces was problematic in so far as they were a source of abuses. The French forces had to find simple coordination measures. On the other hand, Tuareg scouts proved tremendously helpful. It was very important to have a good liaison detachment with the African soldiers. The utility bin of the engineers proved helpful in order to deal with the discovered weapons. In terms of tactics, the officers had to be very flexible. The captains had to get used to changing resources and organisation. The troops used helicopters to deploy fuel supplies. The enemy had shown itself to be mobile and tactically proficient, trying to last until it was cornered in the city and ultimately agreeing to sacrifice soldiers thanks to their explosive belts. In these circumstances, to get to the results after an engagement was in itself a manoeuvre causing psychological injuries. The enemy soon realized the superiority of VBCIs (armoured vehicle for infantry combat) and discovered the accuracy of 25mm cannon. Therefore, it preferred nesting into the cities or in the wooded areas. The officers had to beware the crews of the VBCI who saw through their binoculars the effects of their 25 mm gun. They were more vulnerable to post-traumatic stress. The VBCI proved to be a reliable vehicle. The air-conditioning remained continuously on. As a consequence, in the VBCI, the temperature went down to 40°.

Despite these various problems, Operation Serval had been an achievement for François Hollande, especially compared with the more controversial role played by French helicopters – under NATO command – during the 2011 Libya campaign. In Mali, the Army had repaired the damage and managed to stabilise the area. Yet Serval also highlighted the military priority of maintaining the French 'African materiel' in good condition and not to distract it away from this theatre of operation. Indeed, the Army had to remain in the Sahel. Moreover, a new call for intervention arose from Central Africa. This presented another good opportunity for the French Army, to monopolise the attention – to the

benefit of the President.

On December 5, 2013, France launched Operation Sangaris in order to put an end to ethnic and religious conflicts ravaging the former Ubangi-Shari. This military return to the cul-de-sac of the French Empire was originally expected to last six months, hence the choice of the ephemeral butterfly Sangaris as the operation's name. Meanwhile, the geopolitical situation of North Africa had been disrupted by the establishment of the Islamic State in Libya. This emirate had the potential to become an extension of the Syrian-Iraqi caliphate. As a result, the Central African Republic suddenly moved from the rank of distant periphery to that of a border to be consolidated. What was the situation of Central Africa during the diplomatic preparation of the Warsaw Summit? On January 10, 2014, Michel Djotodia, who never managed to control his troops, had to resign under the pressure of Chad, and Catherine Samba-Panza was elected interim president in charge of organizing the elections in 2015. She took the reins of a bankrupt country. Official buildings in the provinces had been destroyed or looted (banks, police station, prefecture). Poorly equipped roads and bridges brought about traffic accidents such as the one that killed a corporal in his light armoured vehicle in Bouar. In the rainy season, the north of the country was inaccessible. There were no more prefects and sub-prefects in the provinces. The budget, in the first months of the presidency of Catherine Samba-Panza, only consisted of 300,000 euros. Unpaid officials had returned home. The French Embassy was obliged to pay the food expenses of the gendarmes. The judges of the courts were not paid. Even the prisons had no guards! 60% of schools were closed, teachers had fled Bangui and were not paid. There was no more town hall. 2.5 million people needed emergency humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian problems of the displaced concerned access to drinking water, food, and infectious diseases (malaria, diarrhea) while the population was not vaccinated. State authority barely extended over Bangui. Ethnic conflicts had killed more than 900 people in the provinces. Porous borders were not controlled either by the Central African Republic or neighboring states (Cameroon, Sudan, DRC, Chad), armed groups or road cutters proliferated there.

All these huge challenges had to be dealt with. The French army, initially engaged in a 6-month short-handed police mission, remained in the Central African Republic for more than two years because of the absence of political authorities. For Hollande, the French Army had to disengage after the elections and give way to MINUSCA. The whole problem was to know whether the elections would bring peace to the country or not. The actors at the root of the conflict, Francois Bozizé and Nouredine Adam had no interest in peace. Furthermore, from a historical perspective, elections in the Central African Republic had never been synonymous with peace. Nor had the presence of international forces ever been a guarantee for a return to peace. France had always aimed at intervening rapidly in the Central African Republic and then, disengaging. After its first intervention during Operation Barracuda in 1979, the French army had intervened 7 times in 20 years in this country. In any case, when Hollande prepared for and attended the Warsaw summit, military operations in Africa were still ongoing. Moreover, great terrorist attacks suddenly broke out on the national territory.

4. The Multiplication of Terrorist Attacks: The Third Challenge for France

From 2015 onwards, great terrorist attacks occurred on the French national territory. As a consequence, Hollande was forced to mobilise those soldiers who were not in Africa in order to reassure the population. Up to 10,000 men were initially deployed, although this was later reduced to 7,000. The Army was aware that soldiers in the streets have a very limited effect on terrorist attacks. However, political imperatives prevailed and France prepared itself for additional attacks. Yet when and where would these occur? How to offer the maximum amount of protection? These problems dominated the French security debate. The places of the potential attacks could be in the regions where the largest number of radical Islamists could be found: Paris, Lille, Lyon-Grenoble, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Strasbourg, Marseille and Nice. These attacks could be organized in the provinces rather than in Paris in order to spread insecurity among the entire French population. The terrorists were hoping that the police would be less prepared for this type of action. It was well-known that the Islamic State has sought to obtain the maximum media effect from its attacks. The police stations, barracks and military patrols were traditional targets but they could not match the desired effect; moreover, these sites are protected. Self-radicalized people under the influence of IS propaganda could look for opportunity targets in their immediate environment. They were rarely remotely controlled from the outside. The next IS targets could also be the same as those that had failed previously: shopping malls (A. Abaaoud's latest project) and churches (S. Ahmed Ghلام). The interest of these two targets was the large number of people in a confined space and the lack of protection offered by police or armed soldiers. By targeting a shopping center on the model of Westgate, terrorists would attack the symbol of Western materialism safely. Clearly there were no easy answers, yet a great deal of attention was paid to this real and present danger.

5. France at the Warsaw Summit: Strategic Aims and Results

From January 2014 onwards, France – present on three military fronts - was placed under strong pressure from the United States to stop its arms cooperation with Russia. On March 21, 2014, in the midst of the Ukrainian crisis, Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian announced the end of the Franco-Russian military cooperation while the European Union adopted sanctions against Russia. The delivery of Mistral helicopter carriers was not cancelled however and 400 Russian sailors arrived in Saint-Nazaire at the end of June 2014 for 4 months of training. On September 3, 2014, Hollande was gently *encouraged* to suspend the delivery of Mistrals. The French Presidency subjected the delivery of the boats to two impossible conditions: a cease-fire and a political settlement in Ukraine. On January 14, 2015, Russia requested a written explanation for this refusal to deliver the Mistrals. It then reclaimed 1.163 billion euros. Now, the conservative opposition immediately seized the opportunity to weaken Hollande. In 2014, a wave of Russophilia touched all political factions. For example, François Fillon met Vladimir Putin several times. In July 2015, Thierry Mariani, member of the French Parliament and known abroad

for his support towards Russia, announced that he would travel four days to Russia and Crimea with nine other French MP's. In October 2015, Nicolas Sarkozy himself gave a lecture on the international situation at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), and then spoke with Putin. Obviously, these political manoeuvres, with purely opportunistic aims, prevented Hollande from being too tough against Russia. Moreover, his advisors were not convinced of the Russian threat, particularly not those of the more 'hard line' NATO members such as Poland. According to one French official:

The Polish and Baltic states have always been very vindictive with their Western allies as far as the so-called Russian threat is concerned. The Germans, Dutch, French, Italians and Spaniards do not believe in the reality of the threat. Even though military pressure can be felt every day, there is no existential threat, no risk of invasion all guns blazing. The Poles take it for granted that the whole world must be deployed on their sacred ground. They are very demanding. There are of course commercial interests behind all this: they want staff because it means investments and jobs. In fact, they want Western money much more than western security. They do not really believe that they are threatened but use a sort of sentimental racket in order to strengthen their defence. Now Western states do not wish to create the Russian threat. Putin's Russia is complicated, it is not really friendly or cooperative, but if we pretend there is a threat, the prophecy will become true and the wolf will come. As far as France is concerned, it considers that it manages the southern flank of the Alliance, just as it did during the Cold War. Now NATO is a free-rider of the French security policy in Africa. Our commitments limit our abilities - and our desires - to scatter our troops on secondary theatres (a Russian theatre would be virtual, which is even worse). If Latvians and Lithuanians really believed in a Russian threat, they would pay themselves a defense worthy of the name, like the Finns and the Swiss. Since this is not the case, it means they do not really believe in the threat. Now the French presence in Africa is obviously very important for its allies. The British would not have been able to carry out operation Palliser in Sierra Leone without the direct support of France, without France's defence agreements, without its partnerships, especially with Senegal. As for the Americans, would they be in Djibouti today if France had not kept the country free from any threat since its independence in 1977? France, which is a good student of the Baltic Air Policing, will thus contribute to the deployed force, under the British framework but will not do anything more. The British position is of course very different in so far as its army could become an army of non-employment once the budget devoted to aircraft carriers and F35 has dried up the budget.⁴

Thus, when the NATO Summit of Warsaw took place on July 8-9 2016, France officially backed the most dramatic decision, which consisted in deploying four multinational battalions in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Hollande highlighted the

⁴ Interview with senior French military official, November 2017.

Alliance's unity and the need for Europeans to devote more resources to their defence and security in all areas. However, he was cautious enough not to promise too much. It won't be difficult for France to lend its excess of 'unemployed colonels' to NATO 'bureaucratic cemeteries' if they enjoyed military exercises in Poland. As for the gallant knights, they would remain in the Sahel, waiting – under the moon - for the next attack.