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France's Strategy

By George Friedman
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New political leaders do not invent new national strategies. Rather, they adapt enduring national strategies to the moment. On Tuesday, Francois Hollande will be inaugurated as France's president, and soon after taking the oath of office, he will visit German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Berlin. At this moment, the talks are expected to be about austerity and the European Union, but the underlying issue remains constant: France's struggle for a dominant role in European affairs at a time of German ascendance.

Two events shaped modern French strategy. The first, of course, was the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 and the emergence of Britain as the world's dominant naval power and Europe's leading imperial power. This did not eliminate French naval or imperial power, but it profoundly constrained it. France could not afford to challenge Britain any more and had to find a basis for accommodation, ending several centuries of hostility if not distrust.

The second moment came in 1871 when the Prussians defeated France and presided over the unification of German states. After its defeat, France had to accept not only a loss of territory to Germany but also the presence of a substantial, united power on its eastern frontier. From that moment, France's strategic problem was the existence of a unified Germany.

France had substantial military capabilities, perhaps matching and even exceeding that of Germany. However, France's strategy for dealing with Germany was to build a structure of alliances against Germany. First, it allied with Britain, less for its land capabilities than for the fact that Britain's navy could blockade Germany and therefore deter it from going to war. The second ally was Russia, the sheer size of which could threaten Germany with a two-front war if

one began. Between its relationships with Britain and Russia, France felt it had dealt with its strategic problem.

This was not altogether correct. The combination of forces facing Germany convinced Berlin that it had to strike first, eliminating one enemy so that it would not be faced with a two-front war. In both the first and second world wars, Germany attempted to eliminate France first. In World War I it came close, France saving itself only at the Second Battle of the Marne. The Germans surprised the French and perhaps even themselves by withstanding the Russians, the French and the British in a two-front war. With the weakening of Russia, Germany had new units available to throw at the French. The intervention of the United States changed the balance of the war and perhaps saved France.

In World War II, the same configuration of forces was in place and the same decisions were made. This time there was no miracle on the Marne, and France was defeated and occupied. It again was saved by an Anglo-American force that invaded and liberated France, effectively bringing to power the man who, in one of those rare instances in history, actually defined French strategy.

Charles de Gaulle recognized that France was incapable of competing with the United States and the Soviet Union on the global stage. At the same time, he wanted France to retain its ability to act independently of the two major powers if necessary. Part of the motivation was nationalism. Part of it was a distrust of the Americans. The foundation of post-war American and European defense policy was the containment of the Soviet Union. The strategy was predicated on the assumption that, in the event of a Soviet invasion, European forces supported by Americans would hold the Soviets while the United States rushed reinforcements to Europe. As a last resort, the United States had guaranteed that it would use nuclear weapons to block the Soviets.

De Gaulle was not convinced of the American guarantees, in part because he simply didn't see them as rational. The United States had an interest in Europe, but it was not an existential interest. De Gaulle did not believe that an American president would risk a nuclear counterattack on the United States to save Germany or France. It might risk conventional forces, but they may not be enough. De Gaulle believed that if Western Europe simply relied on American hegemony without an independent European force, Europe would ultimately fall to the Soviets. He regarded the American guarantees as a bluff.

This was not because he was pro-Soviet. Quite the contrary, one of his priorities on taking power in 1945 was blocking the Communists. France had a powerful Communist Party whose members had played an important role in the resistance against the Nazis. De Gaulle thought that a Communist government in France would mean the end of an independent Europe. West Germany, caught between a Communist France supplied with Soviet weapons and the Red Army in the east, would be isolated and helpless. The Soviets would impose hegemony.

For de Gaulle, Soviet or American hegemony was anathema to France's national interests. A Europe under American hegemony might be more benign, but it was also risky because de Gaulle feared that the Americans could not be trusted to come to Europe's aid with sufficient force in a conflict. The American interest was to maintain a balance of power in Europe, as the

British had. Like the British in the Napoleonic wars, the Americans would not fully commit to the fight until the Europeans had first bled the Soviets dry. From de Gaulle's point of view, this is what the Americans had done in World War I and again in World War II, invading France in mid-1944 to finish off Nazi Germany. De Gaulle did not blame the United States for this. De Gaulle, above all others, understood national self-interest. But he did not believe that American national self-interest was identical to France's.

Nonetheless, he understood that France by itself could not withstand the Soviets. He also knew that neither the West Germans nor the British would be easily persuaded to create an alliance with France designed to unite Europe into one alliance structure able to defend itself. De Gaulle settled on the next best strategy, which was developing independent military capabilities sufficient to deter a Soviet attack on French territory without coming to the Americans for help. The key was an independent nuclear force able, in de Gaulle's words, to "tear an arm off" if the Russians attacked. Mistrustful of the Americans, he hoped that a French nuclear arsenal would deter the Soviets from moving beyond the Rhine River if they invaded West Germany.

But at the core of de Gaulle's thinking was a deeper idea. Caught between the Americans and the Soviets, with a fragmented Europe in between, half dominated by the Soviets and the other half part of an American-dominated NATO, he saw the fate of France as being in the hands of the two superpowers, and he trusted neither. Nor did he particularly trust the other Europeans, but he was convinced that in order to secure France there had to be a third force in Europe that would limit the power of both Americans and Soviets.

The concept of a European alternative was not rooted solely in de Gaulle's strategic analysis. Establishing deep ties through a security alliance (possibly under NATO) and some sort of economic union was viewed by Europe in general and France in particular as an appealing way to end the cycle of violent competition that had begun in 1871.

De Gaulle supported economic integration as well as an independent European defense capability. But he objected to any idea that would cost France any element of its sovereignty. Treaties signed by sovereign nations could be defined, redefined and if necessary abandoned. Confederation or federation meant a transfer of sovereignty and the loss of decision-making at a national level, the inability to withdraw from the group and the inability of the whole to expel a part.

De Gaulle objected to NATO's structure because it effectively limited France's sovereignty. NATO's Military Committee was effectively in command of the military forces of the constituent nations, and at a time of war, NATO's supreme allied commander in Europe -- always an American -- would automatically take command. De Gaulle did not object to the principle of NATO in general, and France remained a member, but he could not accept that French troops were automatically tied to a war plan or were automatically under the command of anyone who wasn't French. That decision would have to be made by France when the time came. It could not be assumed.

In this sense, de Gaulle differed from the extreme visions of European integrationists, who saw a United States of Europe eventually forming. Like the British, whom he believed would always

pursue their interests regardless of any treaty, he was open to an alliance of sovereign European states, but not to the creation of a federation in which France would be a province.

De Gaulle understood the weakness in what would become the European Union, which was that national interests always dominated. No matter how embedded nations became in a wider system, so long as national leaders were answerable to their people, integration would never work in time of crisis, and would compound the crisis by turning it from what it originally concerned into a crisis of mixed sovereignty.

However, de Gaulle also wanted France to play a dominant role in European affairs, and he knew that this could be done only in an alliance with Germany. He was confident -- perhaps mistakenly -- that given the psychological consequences of World War II, France would be the senior partner in this relationship.

The descendants of de Gaulle accept his argument that France has to pursue its own interests, but not his obsession with sovereignty. Or, more precisely, they created a strategy that seemed to flow from de Gaulle's logic. As de Gaulle had said, France alone could not hope to match the global superpowers. France needed to be allied with other European countries, and above all with Germany. The foundation of this alliance had to be economic and military. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the urgency of the military threat dissolved. France's presidents since the end of the Cold War, Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy, believed that the Gaullist vision could be achieved solely through economic ties.

It is in this context that Hollande is going to Germany. Although Sarkozy went as a committed ally of Germany, Hollande will not necessarily be predisposed to German solutions for Europe's problems. This is somewhat startling in post-Cold War Franco-German relations, but it is very much what de Gaulle would have accepted. France's economic needs are different from those of Germany. Harmonization agreements where there is no harmony are dangerous and unenforceable. A strong "non" is sometimes needed. The irony is that Hollande is a Socialist and the ideological enemy of Gaullism. But as we said, most presidents do not make strategy but merely shape an existing national strategy for the moment. It would seem to us that Hollande will now begin, very slowly, to play the Gaullist hand.