

Can France find an ally? The dilemma of Paris strategists

by Laurent Murawiec

When U.S. Secretary of State James Baker arrived in Paris on Feb. 10, his request to meet President François Mitterrand was haughtily denied. The snub was as deliberate as it was unique in Baker's tour of Europe. It expressed not only the French President's rage at having the CIA meddle in French affairs—when the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission set off the wave of stock market scandals that implicated the entourage, collaborators and political friends of the President, and ultimately cost the life of Mitterrand's closest and oldest personal friend—but also the angry and frightened puzzlement of the French elite at the shifts in U.S. foreign policy, in the direction of decoupling from Europe and making deals with Moscow over the heads of the Europeans.

The French media have liberally refreshed their readers' memories of Jimmy Carter in their comments on George Bush. But the foremost object of concern is West Germany, and how she is being treated by Washington. What results is a series of initiatives directed at Bonn. Whether it will amount to a strategy is another matter.

Paris and the Soviet question

Below the rhetorical surface of day-to-day comments on the person of Mikhail Gorbachov, a major effort has been undertaken in the French elites to appraise the evolutions taking place in the U.S.S.R. Defense Minister Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a Socialist with strong nationalist leanings, has repeatedly warned against blue-eyed perception of Russian strategy, stressing instead that Soviet military and overall strategy had not changed one iota.

Le Monde, the newspaper of record whose editors are very close to both the Elysée Palace and its presidential staff, and the Quai d'Orsay, the French Foreign Ministry, published a series of features on the U.S.S.R. which concluded that Gorbachov "has a minute chance of succeeding" in what he said he is undertaking, but emphasized that "not only have the instruments of dictatorial power remained unscathed—the one-party system, the monopoly on information and the might of the political police—but tomorrow's evolutions could also make us some day regret the soft totalitarianism of the Brezhnev period. The establishment of a classic emergency rule, the self-assertion (on a background of misery and

growing political disarray) of a xenophobic, anti-Western Russian nationalism, no scenario whatsoever may be ruled out which spells victory for obscurantism. The worst may come tomorrow, but, contrary to senile Brezhnevism, it would nonetheless be utterly different from Sovietism, which is now gone forever."

So, President Mitterrand has good words for Mr. Gorbachov; his close associate, Foreign Minister Roland Dumas, travels hither and thither to Eastern Europe. No bad words are marring bilateral relations with Moscow. But the probing and the appraisal go on. A few months ago, Mitterrand intimate Régis Debray, the former guerrilla turned into a member of the high-brow Conseil d'Etat, was warning that the ideological death of Communism and Sovietism meant the great return of a fanatically chauvinistic Russian Orthodoxy. Similar sounds were chimed by the influential academic Helene Carrere d'Encausse, one of France's leading Sovietologists, whose best-selling book *Le malheur russe (Misfortunate Russia)* presents educated public opinion with similar theses. Mrs. Carrere d'Encausse's 1977 book *L'Empire éclate (The Exploded Empire)* had foreseen and forecast Moscow's trouble with its Muslim Republics.

At a more operational level of policy, a sober assessment of the Soviet situation came from businessman Alain Minc, the right-hand man of Olivetti's Carlo De Benedetti in France (Minc runs CERUS, De Benedetti's French holding company): While Gorbachov et al. may "self-subvert" their own system in a positive direction, Minc told interviewers, a greater likelihood is that "the oppositions coalesce: the Russian-nationalist opposition, the military opposition, the bureaucratic opposition. Some form of hard-line regime emerges. In this case, our [Western] concessions will have become irreversible. We all wish the first hypothesis to come true. But I am struck that Western governments wish the first and forget the risk that the second hypothesis come true."

Only the KGB has the strength to transform Russia, argues Minc, but "at any rate, Russia, the Soviet Union . . . [has] the strategy of a Great Power . . . and, with or without perestroika, will not lose sight of its two aims: the warm-water oceans and the decoupling of Europe from the United States."

Paris, London, and Bonn

Whoever has been in power in Paris, the Socialists from 1981 to 1985 and again since 1988, or the Gaullists, has made meritorious efforts to define more common defense policies with Britain. The accelerating weakening of the American commitment was impelling Paris toward reviewing concepts such as a Franco-British nuclear defense of Europe, the reviving of the Western European Union (WEU)—a forum of NATO countries minus the U.S.A. and Canada—and closer collaboration in arms production and procurement.

However, when British Defense Secretary George Younger visited his opposite number Chevènement late in February, disillusion was dominant on the French side: Instead of the expected talks about integrating arms producers, schemes of a merger between British Aerospace and France's Thomson-CSF and the like, Younger announced that Britain could not quite make up her mind as to the project of a medium-range air-launched nuclear missile, the ASLP, a "pre-strategic" missile whose joint production had been discussed for two years between the two countries. London seems to be tilting toward working with the American SRAM/SRAM-2 missile.

This seems to bury active hopes of any significant Franco-British cooperation, whether wishes to that effect were pious hopes or potential realities. Paris has one, and only one serious partner, the Federal Republic of Germany.

But near-panic has seized French policymakers at the sight of Chancellor Helmut Kohl being besieged externally by Washington's low blows, and internally by the disintegration of the ruling coalition and its conservative mainstay. In 1983, Mitterrand's speech at the Bundestag in favor of the Euro-missiles had played an important role in securing the endorsement of the policy. Paris now blew many a fuse when James Baker put ostentatious, heavy pressure upon Bonn on the issue of modernizing the short-range nuclear artillery. Authorized voices started a chorus warning against undue arm-twisting tactics being applied upon Kohl.

Le Monde editor André Fontaine demanded that German sovereignty be respected. Mitterrand, meeting the British prime minister early in March, tried to "play the mediator between Thatcher and Kohl."

Extreme concern was apparent in a front-page editorial of *Le Monde* after Red-Green and ultra-right election victories in Germany and Austria: "This time, it's serious. . . . The frustration which takes the form of votes for the ultra-right, but also, in other political parties, of asserting that restrictions to national sovereignty must be brought to an end, must be taken seriously, lest it lead to the destabilization of the Central European democracies."

Once again, a formulation designed to enlighten public opinion came from Alain Minc, acting in some capacity of unofficial spokesman for an unofficial policy: "Chancellor Kohl is a great European—and people will only realize that

after he is gone. . . . We have the luck of facing an exceptionally pro-European German leadership. Unless we move things with them now, it will not be possible tomorrow. Three months ago, Kohl's reelection seemed a sure thing. Who can tell today whether the FDP, whose survival demands that they betray every ten years, will not go to the other side and enter a coalition with the SPD?"

Faced with a leftward-eastward tilt of Germany, France, Minc said, "must act quickly. . . . We are no major economic power but a regional one. Germany is a world economic power. . . . We have an enormous strategic power. . . . our independent *Force de Frappe*. . . . The real test is: Do we accept that Strasbourg equals Hamburg? . . . There is a whole spectrum to strengthen Franco-German relations, from merging the two countries to just a shade more than the Treaty of 1963. The real thing, real action, is defense. This only goes if our nuclear defense perimeter includes Germany."

A military Eureka?

On this background, the French Defense Ministry's canvassing of the idea of a "military Eureka" is an important initiative: In 1983-84, in reaction to Reagan's announcement of SDI, Mitterrand had called into life a European civilian high-technology cooperation project dubbed Eureka. A number of projects have since stemmed from the program.

What the Directorate General for Armaments of the Ministry—the guts of the French military-industrial complex—now explores, after Prime Minister Michel Rocard first aired the idea last November, is a project to expand and extend Eureka into a system of West European arms producers jointly developing high-technology military projects, with governmental support, upstream of the usual cooperation to produce arms, and in order to produce *new* weapons technologies.

Also Chevènement, visiting West Germany, called for Franco-German military integration especially in the area of space—which the highly successful Ariane space program certainly makes a feasible option. Since Prime Minister Rocard has raised the possibility of cutting the defense budget in the next few years, and since quite a few major procurement programs for the French Armed Forces have been slowed down and spread over longer periods, Franco-German cooperation is also desired to alleviate the financial burden. This is one good reason for the French to try to use German discontent with the British lead in the European consortium that is developing the European Fighter Aircraft (EFA), and try to recruit Bonn to join instead Dassault's "Rafael" advanced fighter project.

The paradox, and the problem, is that this Socialist government, many of whose members were sworn enemies of de Gaulle's independent foreign policy, now has to fall back on precisely the policies of the old General. Whether they have the ability and strength to carry them out, under present circumstances, is another matter.