

Extraordinary Steps in Franco-Russian Relations

by Jacques Cheminade

"Do the French and Russian Foreign Affairs and Defense Ministers still have anything to say to each other?" *Le Monde* asked editorially on July 10: "Because, according to them, they agree on all issues." The description of French and Russian policies as converging, "down to minute details," came both from the leading French dailies *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*, and from within Paris political circles, after a high-level visit to Moscow by French officials on July 7-9.

When Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov answered a question which had been put to French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, Defense Minister Michele Alliot Marie declared undiplomatically: "The confidence in our relations is such, that one of us French could answer for one of you Russians, as Sergei just did for us."

Such a Franco-Russian rapprochement is unprecedented, and goes even further than during the era of President Charles de Gaulle. It was made spectacularly visible during the visit paid to Moscow by de Villepin and Alliot Marie, accompanied by former French Prime Minister Alain Juppé, for the inauguration of an exhibition on de Gaulle at the Russian Historical Museum on Red Square. The French and Russian Defense and Foreign Affairs Ministers held a bilateral second conference of the Franco-Russian Security Council, and were received by President Vladimir Putin at his Summer house in Novo-Ogarevo. The Russian head of state observed, "During these last years, relations between our two countries have not only reached a new level of intensity, but have also changed in quality." During those same days, the "historical Gaullists," who had fought side-by-side with the Red Army in World War II, were hosted in Moscow. Alain Lebourg, head of the Charles de Gaulle Institute, declared that "the Russians have an unique understanding of de Gaulle. They are the best to understand such a great man."

Military Cooperation Is Unprecedented

The Security Council talks took up "questions pertaining to international security," in the period after the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, as well as plans for expanded cooperation at the United Nations and in other international institutions. "We agree fully and in detail on terrorism, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and all the issues of East-West development," declared the four ministers, to the surprise of all observers who knew the present warmth of the Franco-Russian relations, but did not expect such a public exhibition of it.

Showing the unprecedented level of bilateral military cooperation, for the first time in the entire history of NATO, "western" and "eastern" nuclear submarines, one French and one Russian, were engaged in joint naval maneuvers in the Sea of Norway between July 7 and July 10. The French nuclear attack submarine, the *Casabianca*, made a symbolic stop at the naval base of Severomorsk (Kola peninsula, near Murmansk), where the *Kursk* strategic submarine was based before it sank in the Summer of 2000.

More concretely, it has been confirmed that last Fall, when the American Administration was beginning to threaten Iraq more and more aggressively, a secret agreement was made between France and Russia for extended military cooperation, during President Putin's trip to Toulouse, the French aerospace city. This agreement was given substance during the recent Le Bourget aerospace exhibition, through an arrangement between the French firms Dassault and EADS, and the Russian Sukhoi. It involves common production of drones, integration of French missiles on the Sukhois, and modernization of Russian production lines. Moreover, the French are to cooperate with the Russians in matters concerning the Airbus, and aerospace. The French would provide access to the Russians at their equatorial space-launch base in Kourou, French Guiana. The two countries will develop combat planes of the fifth generation, including a Russian airfighter, the MiG-AT.

Moreover, a significant level of cooperation was established between the French firm Thales (avionic division) and the Russian Aerokosmicheskoye Oborudovaniye (aerospace equipment), while a secret protocol was signed on nuclear cooperation involving the French firm Areva, which financed the de Gaulle exhibition in Moscow. Some of these agreements were finalized by representatives of these aerospace firms during the early July talks. Further agreements, such as one involving the projected EU-Russian space launch site at Kourou, are in the works.

Against 'Cheney People,' Not America

The most astute people in Paris political circles stress the importance of these developments, as a counterweight to the "Cheney people" in the United States, but not as a challenge to "true American interests." On July 10, alongside the reports from Moscow about these meetings, *Le Monde* and other French press published stories on the "Niger yellowcake" fraud—with an emphasis on Cheney's role. *Le Monde* wrote, "According to [Ambassador Joseph] Wilson, the U.S. Administration was informed at its highest level on all the doubts about the matter, including of course the cabinet of Vice President Dick Cheney." *Libération* was more blunt: "Ex-ambassador Wilson affirms that Vice President Cheney was well aware of his work." The forged documents on Iraq-Niger uranium deals, said *Le Figaro*, "would have never come out of the drawers but for Vice President Cheney, who, according to Mr. Wilson, had put pressure on the CIA to produce elements to confirm a nuclear threat from Iraq."