

A geopolitical approach to the Paris-London-Berlin triad

A new "unbalanced balance"

Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER

Associate Fellow at the Thomas More Institute, Fellow at the Institut Français de Géopolitique (Paris VIII Vincennes-Saint-Denis University), author of *La France, l'Europe, l'OTAN : une approche géopolitique de l'atlantisme français* (ed. Unicomm, Paris, 2006), *La Russie, de Poutine à Medvedev* (collab., Institut Thomas More/DAS, ed. Unicomm, Paris, 2008) and *La Russie menace-t-elle l'Occident ?* (Choiseul, Paris, 2009).



The role played by France and the United Kingdom in the military operations in Libya on the one hand and the reservations expressed on the subject by Germany on the other have brought to light differences in strategic posture between Paris, London and Berlin. A new "entente cordiale" seems to be taking over from the traditional "Franco-German couple" and the prospect of a Paris-London-Berlin triumvirate at the head of "the Europe of Lisbon" is growing even more distant. Having said that, it is not so much a matter of power rivalries, according to Westphalian logic, but of defining new geopolitical balances within the "Euro-Atlantic community" and the area stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

"Man's future remains unpredictable and cannot be determined by any intellectual doctrine (...). We tend to let ourselves be deluded by progress, happiness and comfort when suddenly, development itself brings us face to face with the old problem of survival, i.e. the preservation of existence."

Julien Freund

Europe was the inaugural setting for the Cold War, as well as its main theatre, and this is what kept it at the centre of world politics for several decades, strategically speaking at least. Separated from its continental *hinterland* by the "Iron curtain", Western Europe represented the non-American part of the Atlantic alliance. The political and economic organisation of the area was based on an "unbalanced balance" between France, the Federal Republic of Germany and the United Kingdom, sheltered by the American military umbrella. France made use of its status as a nuclear power to compensate for the economic power of West Germany. As for the United Kingdom, its "*special relationship*" with the United States helped it to maintain its rank. More so than in other parts of the world, the end of the East-West conflict deeply shook up the power stakes within

Europe. It suddenly became "a single, whole" Europe, right from its westernmost tips to the Baltic-Black sea isthmus.

Consequently, the reunification of Germany and the disappearance of "Soviet Russia" brought down the sub-continental order of the Cold War. The need for a "new set theory" immediately made itself known. Since then, Paris, London and Berlin have been seeking new balance points in their reciprocal relationships. Of course, the configurations resulting from these intertwined national strategies do not conform to the image of a "French style Europe", ordered according to the rules of "reasoning reason" (the spirit of geometry without the spirit of finesse). Even so, today's Europe is not the same as the Europe of old before the "new thirty years war" (1914-1945), split by rivalries between "powers" fighting for world hegemony. The unbalanced balance between Paris, London and Berlin, flexible role-sharing and intelligent cooperation with their allies, can contribute to the strength and coherence of the "Euro-Atlantic community".

Reunification and self assertion

> The new German "normality"

When the possibility of German reunification first appeared on the horizon, the simple prospect of the event quickly aroused concern of Western-European allies and partners, reactivating geopolitical portrayals structured around themes such as the "*Verspätete Nation*" ("delayed nation"), unstable by nature, and the "*Sonderweg*" ("special path"), in contrast with the West. Germany gradually became a central power once more, the expression referring to its geographical location – in Median Europe, between the Baltic, the Adriatic and the Black seas -, to its demographical and economic weighting, to the exemplary nature of its political institutions and to its decisive role in Euro-Atlantic entreaties (NATO-EU). The rehabilitation of the concepts of "power" and "national interest" was nevertheless chastened by a certain "culture of restraint", expressed by a reticence to use armed forces (1). Now surrounded by allied countries, Germany embarked upon dialectics, torn between its membership of the West on the one hand and its great interest in the "East" (Russia) and the "Far East" (Central Asia and China) on the other. The aim as far as Berlin is concerned is to work towards stabilising the Eurasian *hinterland*, to ensure the country's energy security and to consolidate the positions acquired on emerging markets ("BRICs" amongst others).

> A primarily geo-economic power

The German approach to its close and more distant environment has virtually nothing in common with the former political romanticism and "*Sonderweg*" themes. Consequently, the German refusal to approve the United Nation's Security Council's 1973 resolution (resolution regarding Libya) on 17th March 2011 should not be considered through the "Rapallo" prism as a belated echo of the Germano-Bolshevik treaty signed outside the Genoa conference proper on 16th April 1922. Although Germany's abstention is not the sign of a geopolitical swing towards Russia or the "BRICs", it is an expression of realities that are both structural and cyclical. In particular, let us quote the pacifism of major sections of public opinion, prolonged by significant constitutional constraints, and the fragile nature of the current governmental coalition, which is contested as a result of Berlin's role in the recovery plans for the Euro area. This episode is highly revealing of the underlying trends. Germany's attitude on the international scene is more assured and self-centred, but Germany has no real aspirations to *leadership*, with the international responsibilities that come with it. Its self assertion ("*Selbstbehauptung*") is of a geo-economic fashion. Germany has thus returned to the path it was following in the "*Made in Germany*" era (2). Despite the delayed reform of the armies launched by the Defence Minister on 18th May 2011, Germany does not seem ready to develop military efforts in line with its economic power, especially given the likelihood of political change (3).

The lack of a Paris-London-Berlin triumvirate

> Eleatic paradoxes of the "Franco-German couple"

The reunification of Germany and the redefinition of the balance of power in Europe put the "Franco-German couple" to the test. In fact, we must stress the deceptive nature of this idyllic portrayal of bilateral relationships, against a backdrop of division and Cold War. French foreign policy consisted of leaning on the Federal Republic to act as the leader of Western Europe. From the end of the Cold War onwards, France set back to work on the idea of a "Europe-power" with its own currency, diplomacy and defence (see Maastricht treaty). With such prospects in mind, the "Franco-German couple" is seen as the beginnings of a "hard core" or beating heart of a Europe organised in concentric circles, the dynamics of which would pull the United Kingdom in its wake. In fact, the German leaders were focussing more on the challenges of reunification and on revaluing "*Deutschland*" as an industrial site; they neglected the defence stakes, and French ideas ran up against eleatic paradoxes ("Achilles' giant stride left standing"). Consequently, military expenditure dropped and Franco-German "EADS naval" or "land" projects were unsuccessful. Over the years, Germany's weighting within Europe grew and the relationship between Paris and Berlin was reversed. If Paris was not careful to maintain the relationship, the French economy would appear weakened, which would result in distrust on the financial markets (4).

> Franco-British convergences

The rhetoric surrounding the "Franco-German couple" partly concealed a tightening of links between Paris and London, which was nonetheless essential for the launch the CSDP (see the Saint-Malo declaration, 4th December 1998). It is true that the rapprochement of the two countries was based on "constructive ambiguities" which were shattered during the Iraq crisis (5). Since then, bilateral cooperation has been facilitated by Paris's acknowledgement that the "Europe of defence" was based on intellectual constructivism and full involvement in the military structures within NATO. The financial crisis and its effects on military budgets and the apparent decreasing interest of the United States in "Old Europe" accelerated these new convergences. On November 2nd 2010, Nicolas Sarkozy and David Cameron therefore signed two treaties aiming to increase bilateral military cooperation, a condition *sine qua non* for remaining geopolitical players of international ranking (6). These treaties still need to be given greater substance, and operations in Libya are a hurdle to overcome in the process. However, since the rejection of the European Constitution in 2005, the French view of the EU has become significantly closer to that of Britain, i.e. a huge market involving cooperation of varying geometry between voluntary States, and open to "the open sea". This view is more in line with the reality of the EU: it is definitely not a "federation of nation States" but a vast, loose pan-European *Commonwealth*.

Synergies and complementarities

> The strength of weapons and opening up to the "open sea"

When looking at the long term picture, it seems that military cooperation between France and the United Kingdom should go without saying - since the Crimean war, their troops have fought on the same battlefields on several occasions -, and a lot of time appears to have been wasted since the Suez crisis and its after effects. These new convergences are the continuation of intergovernmental logic and, against a backdrop of globalisation and the extension of orders of magnitude, the political finality is to preserve the status of the two countries as world powers. Having said that, strengthened bilateral cooperation is an objective contribution to European defence and to Old Europe's role in international stability. Since war remains the *ultima ratio* in human affairs, it is important for the two main European powers to retain means of intervention on the outskirts and borders of the continent

(North Africa, the Near East) and even beyond (Black Africa, the Greater Middle East), and for them to assume their role as "framework nations" (7). Combining French and British capacities, both in diplomatic and military terms, is also crucial when it comes to reaching the intensity threshold for influencing the great American strategy in any significant manner (see the case of Libya). Last of all, the stakes are ontological. Opening up to distant areas (the "open sea") is an integral part of the history of the West and it is up to the Atlantic powers, although not only them, to uphold this spiritual and temporal inheritance (8).

> Consolidation of the EU and "Enlargement"

The redefinition of stability in Europe does not mean resuming the balancing games of the "concert of power". Once the close relationship between Paris and Berlin has been relieved of its idyllic imagery, it remains of prime importance. The health of the Euro area depends on it, since joint action is required, both in form and substance, in order to find a solution to the public financial crisis (9). Given that the Euro area is a "common good", the stakes go beyond a single bilateral relationship. Splitting up the Euro area would threaten the foundations of a "single, whole" Europe and would break down the fragile balances of world finance. The stakes also concern security in the wider sense, since Paris and Berlin need to work together to impress stability lines on the Eurasian *hinterland*. Although joint defence is a matter for NATO, the EU is the logical framework for taking action to expand the borders of liberty towards Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. In the same way, a clear-sighted policy of commitment and responsibility towards Russia, whilst respecting existing alliances, requires Franco-German agreement to extend to Poland (10). The "European neighbourhood policy" and resolution of "common neighbourhood" conflicts (Moldavia, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan) also need a strong Franco-German relationship and are a prerequisite for such a relationship, albeit an insufficient one.

Conclusion

The bilateral relationship game within the Paris-London-Berlin triad and the role-sharing which is starting to emerge according to individual situations and the law of comparative advantages are at the heart of European geopolitical processes. If each country obeys the rules of fair play and keeps the commitments that prevail in Euro-Atlantic entreaties, then national ambitions can contribute to the common good, despite the resulting effects of competition. We must emphasise here the special role played by France, which is bound by close ties to Germany and the United Kingdom at the same time, whilst the Anglo-German relationship remains somewhat shaky.

An analysis of these geopolitical dynamics reveals the improbability of a "total Europe" which would be more than the sum of its parts. The Paris-London-Berlin triad finds its balance points within a wider unit, i.e. the "Euro-Atlantic community" (the same applies to other European nations). Geocentric mentalities help to conceal the importance of this "great area". However, the projection of stability towards the East and South of Europe is dependent on its cohesion and proper functioning. European powers need to work closely with the United States if they are to have any real influence in the region stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok and in the Greater Middle East.

Jean-Sylvestre MONGRENIER

(1) After Gerhard Schröder's election as Chancellor (1998), German involvement in the Kosovo war (1999) and the deployment of a significant expeditionary force in Afghanistan (2001) seemed to mark the return of Germany to the diplomatic and military frontline. Restrictions in the use of force in Afghanistan (the *caveats*) and reservations expressed over the last few years, both by public opinion and by the political class, are interpreted as nothing more than a pause by some observers, or as national retrenchment by others ("Swiss syndrome").

(2) *Made in Germany* is a book by British journalist Ernest Williams published in 1896. The author wanted to draw the attention of his fellow citizens to the considerable industrial and commercial growth occurring in Germany at the time. From 1887 onwards, a "*Made in Germany*" label was placed on products originating in Germany in order to dissuade British consumers from purchasing them. The unexpected effect of the label was that "*made in Germany*" became synonymous with high quality.

- (3) Current military reforms should enable the *Bundeswehr* to join "polite society" i.e. countries with professionalised armies. The aim of military professionalisation, combined with a decrease in the number of soldiers (185 000 men compared with 220 000 today), is to increase intervention capacities, since the number of soldiers who can be sent on mission is likely to increase (rising from 7500 to 10 000). The problem is the low level of military expenditure, which is to be reduced further by upcoming budget cuts, as well as public hostility to foreign commitments. Given that Germany is surrounded by allied countries and has made extensive economic commitments to Russia, it considers that it has no serious security problems and is envisaging only a very selective involvement in external operations. Afghanistan is not to set a precedent.
- (4) France's considerable interest in the German economic model is not without geopolitical causes and consequences. For more information on this Franco-German "convergence", see Gérard Dussilloll (dir.), "Analyse comparative de la dépense publique en France et en Allemagne", Institut Thomas More, *Benchmarking Note* no. 6, May 2011.
- (5) In the opinion of British leaders, the Saint-Malo declaration and the launch of the CSDP aim to increase military capacities in Europe in order to encourage the United States to remain committed to NATO. As far as their French counterparts are concerned, the aim of the manoeuvre is to lay the foundations for future "European defence".
- (6) The documents signed at Lancaster House consist of a defence and security cooperation treaty, a treaty on nuclear simulation and a declaration on defence and security cooperation.
- (7) A "framework nation" must be in a position to provide strategic operational headquarters and a backbone of sufficient strength to be able to carry out multinational operations. It must be pointed out that Germany has established a "multinationalisable" chain of command and that other European countries are making attempts to do the same (Spain and Italy). We cannot ignore these countries when addressing such issues from a wider angle.
- (8) On this subject, see David Cosandey, *Le Secret de l'Occident*, Champs-Flammarion, 2008.
- (9) If France was deprived of German support, France's financial credibility would rapidly be called into question, which would have serious effects on the markets and the economy. Without French public support, Germany would be indicted for its supposed "arrogance", since arithmetic and public opinion do not always go hand in hand.
- (10) See Jean-Sylvestre Mongrenier, *L'Union européenne et la Russie: un réel partenariat en vue ? L'apport potentiel du Triangle de Weimar*, Réseau du Triangle de Weimar, Warsaw, 28th - 30th October 2010 (text available in French on the Institut Thomas More website).

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Contact

info@institut-thomas-more.org

Tel +33 (0)1 49 49 03 30 – Fax +33 (0)1 49 49 03 33