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The Reluctant Atlanticist: France's Security and Defence Policy in a Transatlantic Context

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ABSTRACT

This article introduces the key tenets of French foreign and security policy during the Cold War, and illustrates the deep challenges to the French consensus raised by the emergence of a unipolar system. There is a growing gap between the rhetoric of French security policy, emphasizing 'autonomy' and 'sovereignty' out of habit from the Cold War, and the actual security practices showing a gradual embedding within the transatlantic security structures. In the absence of a new transpartisan grand narrative relevant for the contemporary international system, such embedding is easily portrayed in France as a 'treason' from a romanticized Gaullist foreign policy.

KEYWORDS France; Defence Policy; Gaullism; International System; NATO

'Vive la France!' tweeted US Senator John McCain, after Paris tried (unsuccessfully in the end) to impose more restraining conditions on the deal between the world's leading powers and Tehran over Iran's nuclear development programme. 'Thank God for France,' added Senator Lindsey Graham. The contrast with the way US officials (particularly from the Republican Party) used to mention France in the previous decade could not be stronger. Gone is the 'Freedom Fries' era when Condoleezza Rice wanted to 'punish France' for opposing the invasion of Iraq out of (justified, as it turned out) concerns that it would durably destabilize the Middle East, and former undersecretary of defense Jed Babbin (MSNBC's 'Hardball', 30 January 2003) could declare: 'going to war without France is like going deer hunting without your accordion. You just leave a lot of useless noisy baggage behind'. Nowadays, US think-tanks praise the French armed forces for their quick and effective action in Mali¹ and France's fight against jihadist movements;² soldiers from the US Marine Corps openly express their admiration for the fighting spirit, tactical skills and

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¹Michael Shurkin, *France's War in Mali. Lessons for an Expeditionary Army* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation 2014).

²Christopher S. Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qa'ida in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2015).

preparedness of French soldiers;³ and a Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff forges an 'unmistakable bond' with his French counterpart.⁴

But American policy-makers have not simply changed their perception of French security policy. France actually seems to become closer to the United States. First, France re-joined NATO's integrated command structure in 2008, in a move designed to raise its influence within the alliance but also overcome an old source of transatlantic tension.⁵ Second, President Nicolas Sarkozy decided to significantly increase the French contribution to the International Security and Assistance (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan,⁶ a choice that was well perceived by the United States. Third, as mentioned above, French military activities in the Sahel against jihadist groups as well as the participation in the US-led coalition against ISIS in Iraq and in Syria further improved France's image in the United States. To be fair, even at the worst time of the Franco-American crisis following the French government's opposition to the Iraq War, cooperation in the field of counter-terrorism and counter-piracy always remained strong. But it is clear that something is qualitatively changing in the way France is becoming integrated within the transatlantic security structure. In order to appreciate the magnitude of this change, some historical context is necessary.

The French Exception in the Transatlantic Security Order

In 1958, when Charles de Gaulle came to power, he found France embroiled in the Algerian conflict, and already increasingly concerned about military developments within NATO, which were perceived as threatening France's autonomy.⁷ His foreign policy has fascinated French and international historians alike,⁸ and was a subject of simultaneous irritation and interest from France's partners at the time. French historian Maurice Vaisse found a very effective way of summarizing de Gaulle's foreign policy with the term '*grandeur*' (greatness):⁹ de Gaulle had a grand strategic design, and a means to achieve it. The grand strategic design was to ensure the return

³Chris Hernandez, 'Working with the French Army', *BreachBangClear.com*, 9 July 2013.

⁴Anon., 'France Displaces Britain as Key US Military Ally', *Agence France Presse*, 19 March 2015.

⁵Annick Cizel and Stéphanie von Hlatky, 'From Exceptional to Special? A Reassessment of France-NATO Relations since Reintegration', *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 12/4 (2014), 353–66.

⁶David Auerswald and Steven Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2014).

⁷Jenny Raflik-Grenouilleau *La IVe République et l'Alliance Atlantique. Influence et Dépendance (1945-1958)*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes 2013).

⁸Christian Nuenlist, Anna Locher and Garret Martin (eds.), *Globalizing de Gaulle. International perspectives on French Foreign Policy 1958-1969* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010); Benjamin Rowland (ed.), *Charles de Gaulle's Legacy of Ideas* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2011); Sudhir Hazareesingh, *In the Shadow of the General: Modern France and the Myth of de Gaulle* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2012).

⁹Maurice Vaisse, *La Grandeur. Politique Etrangère du Général de Gaulle* (Paris: Fayard 1998).

of France's presence everywhere in the world, create an autonomous Europe open to Africa, decrease the tensions with the Eastern bloc and establish relations with China. The intellectual cornerstone of this grand strategic design was a cult of sovereignty for its own sake,¹⁰ found among other Western states (for example the UK), but with a specific Gallic turn. In France, the intellectual defence of sovereignty has been intertwined with the specific centralized form taken by the State¹¹ and the importance of the Executive branch in public affairs.¹² De Gaulle's defence of sovereignty also had a more personal dimension: owing much of its intellectual education to Charles Maurras' *Action Française*,¹³ de Gaulle had been influenced by the doctrine of *nationalisme intégral* which was based on the defence of French sovereignty, but also by Maurras' foreign policy ideas of an independent France leading the small nations against the empires.¹⁴ Moreover, de Gaulle still resented the American attempt to place France under the Allied Military Government for Occupied Territories (AMGOT) system in 1944.¹⁵

The means to achieve the grand strategic objective was to claim vocally France's 'autonomy' on every single occasion, and give his country the capabilities to implement and defend this autonomy. The means (autonomy) is often confused with the end (grand strategy) in the assessment of de Gaulle's foreign policy, as the former is more visible (and easily criticisable) than the latter. Yet, distinguishing both is analytically useful: 'autonomy' was never an objective per se, it was a means to accomplish a foreign policy aimed at overcoming the bipolarity of the Cold War, and the somehow mechanical polarization of alliances that came with it. This foreign objective was, with some minor adjustments, adopted by de Gaulle's successors during the Cold War.¹⁶ As such, the French exceptionalism can be understood as the combination of an ambitious grand strategy and the means to implement it through a policy of autonomy.

One of the important means at de Gaulle and his successors' disposal, in order to achieve their foreign policy objective, was the development of an independent French nuclear deterrent capability. Marked by the outcome of the Suez crisis, in which France and the UK were coerced to leave Egypt by

¹⁰Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1999).

¹¹Pierre Rosanvallon, *L'État en France de 1789 à nos Jours* (Paris: Seuil 1990); Simone Goyard-Fabre, *L'État* (Paris: Armand Colin 1999); Jean Picq, *Une Histoire de l'État en Europe. Pouvoir, Justice et Droit du Moyen Âge à nos Jours* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po 2009).

¹²Nicolas Rousselier, *La Force de Gouverner. Le Pouvoir Exécutif en France, XIXe-XXe Siècles* (Paris: Gallimard 2015).

¹³Eugen Weber, *Action Française; Royalism and Reaction in Twentieth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford UP 1962); Jacques Prévotat, *L'Action Française* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 2004); Olivier Dard, *Charles Maurras, Le Maître et l'Action* (Paris: Armand Colin 2013).

¹⁴Georges-Henri Soutou and Martin Motte (eds.), *Entre la Vieille Europe et la Seule France. Charles Maurras, La Politique Extérieure et la Défense Nationale* (Paris: Economica 2009).

¹⁵Jean-François Muracciole, *La Libération de Paris* (Paris: Tallandier 2013), 59–74.

¹⁶Maurice Vaïsse, *La Puissance ou l'Influence? La France dans le Monde depuis 1958* (Paris: Fayard 2009); Frédéric Bozo, *La Politique Étrangère de la France depuis 1945* (Paris: Flammarion 2012).

the USSR and the US, de Gaulle accelerated the nuclear programme initiated by the Fourth Republic with the aim of guaranteeing France's freedom of manoeuvre in relation to the two superpowers.¹⁷ This period was marked by an intense debate in France regarding the proper nuclear strategy to adopt, which opposed the 'atlanticists' and the 'sovereignists'. The first group, led by Raymond Aron and General Beaufre, contended that the French nuclear deterrent should be aimed at reinforcing the American deterrence capabilities, similarly to the British model.¹⁸ While France could be in competition with some allies on a number of issues, competition should not be confused with hostility: the enemy was to the East. The second group, which comprised famous officers such as Generals Gallois and Poirier, advocated that the French nuclear deterrent should not be targeted at any enemy in particular: deterrence cannot be shared, so there should be no reason to subordinate the French capability to the American one. Because this strategic conception dovetailed neatly with de Gaulle's foreign policy objective, it eventually won the strategic debate and was adopted as the French nuclear strategy. Furthermore, this nuclearization of French defence policy also had a consequence on the political regime itself by cementing the role of the French president. Because he commands the nuclear forces, the French president is, literally, the embodiment of French deterrence, which further reinforces the presidential nature of the Fifth Republic. It is no surprise that the French regime has been called a 'nuclear monarchy'.¹⁹

Another way to implement the goal of autonomy was to withdraw the French armed forces from NATO's integrated command structure in 1966. This decision was the culmination of a gradual French disaffection towards NATO, and in particular the Anglo-American primacy in the alliance.²⁰ Of course, the French armed forces were never entirely disconnected from NATO's defence planning process during the Cold War, as Memoranda of Understanding were agreed upon between French head of staffs and SACEURs.²¹ However, this situation had two consequences. First, during the Cold War, the French armed forces were never as integrated as their European counterparts in terms of procedures or equipment. Therefore, the French armed forces lacked sufficient knowledge about the proper NATO

¹⁷Wilfried L. Kohl, *French Nuclear Diplomacy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1971); André Dumoulin, *Histoire de la Dissuasion Nucléaire* (Paris: Argos 2012); Édouard Valensi, *La Dissuasion Nucléaire. L'Aventure Nucléaire Française: les Ergots du Coq* (Paris: L'Harmattan 2013); Jean Guisnel and Bruno Tertrais, *Le Président et la Bombe* (Paris: Odile Jacob 2016).

¹⁸Christian Malis, *Raymond Aron et le Débat Stratégique Français (1930-1966)* (Paris: Economica 2005).

¹⁹Samy Cohen, *La Monarchie Nucléaire* (Paris: Hachette 1986).

²⁰Frédéric Bozo, *La France et l'OTAN. De la Guerre Froide au Nouvel Ordre Européen* (Paris: IFRI 1992); Maurice Vaisse, Pierre Mélandri et Frédéric Bozo (eds.), *La France et l'OTAN, 1949-1996* (Bruxelles: Complexes 1997); Charles G. Cogan, *Forced to Choose: France, the Atlantic Alliance and NATO – Then and Now* (Westport: Praeger 1997).

²¹Sten Rynning, *Changing Military Doctrine: Presidents and Military Power in Fifth Republic France, 1958-2000* (Westport: Praeger 2002).

procedures, which had consequences during the NATO-led operations to which France participated, including Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Even after France had reintegrated the military structure, such a lack of knowledge played out during the Libyan intervention: several policymakers expressed their frustration for not having been able to sufficiently shape the conduct of the campaign, due to a relative lack of understanding of the importance of specific positions within the NATO structure.²² In particular, French officials complained about their lack of influence on the targeting process, due to their relative absence from the Joint Targeting Board but also lamented the fact that they had to convince NATO of the need to have the French helicopter pilots deciding which targets to attack. Therefore, the auto-exclusion of the French armed forces from NATO procedures created an integration gap that is still being filled today. Second, this desire to maintain a French strategic autonomy was also exerted in the former French colonies, with a number of interventions in sub-Saharan Africa (but also Lebanon) during the Cold War. This policy created a two-tier army: an army designed for high-intensity warfare against the Soviet Union, which was never used, and an army designed for quick interventions in Africa built on elite light infantry forces such as the paratroopers and the Foreign Legion. These dual armed forces proved their limitation during the Gulf War, as France struggled to mobilize and deploy 15,000 troops, which were deemed too lightly equipped by the American planners: the French tradition of agility and quick reaction, acquired through several military interventions, lacked sufficient armour to participate in General Schwarzkopf's manoeuvre.²³ To an important degree, the French 'way of warfare' during the Cold War was somehow marginalized, with part of the army designed to fight the Soviet Union incompletely integrated with other NATO armies; and another part specializing in light interventions but lacking experience with high intensity operations.²⁴

As explained above, the French strategic debate has historically been split between 'atlanticists' and 'sovereignists', with the latter group gaining primacy through the primary importance acquired by the nuclear deterrence capability within the French armed forces, and maintaining this position during the Cold War. However, the former group, which considered that France was an integral member of the Atlantic family, never really disappeared, although it was definitely less important in the French decision-making process and less active in the production of a strategic literature. Yet, this dichotomy was also rhetorically manipulated in order to favour the

²²Olivier Schmitt, 'A War Worth Fighting? The Libyan Intervention in Retrospect', *International Politics Reviews*, 3/1 (2015), 10–18.

²³David S. Yost, 'France and the Gulf War of 1990-1991: Political-Military Lessons Learned', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 16/3 (1993), 339–74.

²⁴David S. Yost, *La France et la Sécurité Européenne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

sovereignists' political preferences. As such, 'atlanticist' became an insult in the French political debate, with self-proclaimed heirs to the Gaullist legacy trying to block any political-diplomatic evolution that would seem to threaten France's sovereignty. Therefore, this inflammatory rhetoric about the 'sovereignty' (and associated terms such as 'independence', or 'autonomy') went beyond what France was actually doing, and overlooked the actual steps Paris took towards the allies during the Cold War. Moreover, this also gave the impression to foreign non-specialist observers that France was always more a problem than a reliable partner in the transatlantic security architecture.²⁵ This is not to underplay the fact that France was, indeed, something of an outsider during the Cold War. But there is the risk of focusing too much on the rhetoric of 'sovereignty', thus overlooking both the foreign policy objectives this independence was designed to serve, and the cooperation France achieved with her allies.

Ultimately, France was quite comfortable with the bipolar world, as the opposition between the US and the USSR meant that there was room for an ambitious actor to try to find a third way beyond the bipolarization of the international system. It also meant that France could develop genuinely autonomous ways to act abroad, in particular through military interventions in former colonies and the acquisition of nuclear capabilities. This allowed France to keep behaving as a great power, by adopting practices (in particular nuclear practices) similar to those of the major powers,²⁶ thus mitigating the objective loss of geopolitical importance that France suffered after the Second World War.²⁷ Yet, this situation would change with the end of the Cold War and the apparition of the unipolar world: French exceptionalism would have to reinvent itself.

French Exceptionalism after the Cold War

The transformation of the international system that followed the end of the Cold War put French foreign and security policy under pressure. The French exceptionalism was based on the willingness to find a 'third way' between the two blocs. With the rise of unipolarity,²⁸ this fundamental premise disappeared. Therefore, a progressive gap was created between France's foreign policy objectives, which had to be redefined, and the rhetoric and

²⁵Michael M. Harrison, *The Reluctant Ally: France and Atlantic Security* (Baltimore, John Hopkins Press 1981).

²⁶On diplomatic practices and their ranking effect, see Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot and Iver B. Neumann (eds.), *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2015) and Vincent Pouliot, *International Pecking Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2016).

²⁷Olivier Schmitt, 'Decline in Denial. France since 1945' in Frédéric Mérand (ed.), *Coping with Geopolitical Decline* (forthcoming).

²⁸Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 2008); Nuno S. Monteiro, *Theory of Unipolar Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2013).

practice of independence, which was still implemented by French decision-makers out of habit and experience. Unsurprisingly, French policy-makers were uncomfortable with the new international order, complaining of the 'hyperpower'²⁹ of the United States, and calling on multiple occasions for the emergence of a 'multipolar world'. In their mind, this meant that Europe would become more independent from the United States, in effect a simple update of the autonomy objective inherited from the Cold War, without realizing that a 'multipolar world' could mean that actors such as Russia or China may want to challenge the international order. In other words, French decision-makers simply updated the rhetorical means to achieve France's Cold War foreign policy objective (adding 'multipolarity' to the traditional call for independence), which prevented the emergence of deep thinking about the transformation of the international system and the consequences for French foreign policy.³⁰ In short, after the Cold War, France confused the means with the ends, and was subjugated by the former without re-thinking the core assumptions of the latter.

Yet, much had to be done. The unipolar world order meant that in one way or another, France had to reinvent its relationship with the United States, as it could not manoeuvre between two blocs of equivalent power any longer. It also meant that France's relationship with NATO had to be reconsidered, taking into account the alliance's new roles after the Cold War.³¹ Characteristically, important parts of the French strategic community pushed for the dissolution of NATO after 1991 and immediately saw the USA as a new 'Empire' (heir to the old arch-enemy that was the Holy Roman Empire)³² which had to be tamed. As such, authors reactivated the old Gaullist distinction between the Atlantic Alliance (which could be maintained), and NATO as an organization (which could disappear in order to leave room for a European defence).³³ For more than a decade, French policy-makers hoped for the establishment of a 'European defence' which would, depending on the moment, be a European pillar within NATO or a fully autonomous capacity that would make NATO obsolete. It is only recently that France acknowledged that 'European Defence' as initially

²⁹Hubert Védrine, *Face à l'Hyperpuissance* (Paris: Fayard 2003).

³⁰Philip H. Gordon, *A Certain Idea of France: French Security Policy and the Gaullist Legacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP 1993); Beatrice Heuser, 'Mitterrand's Gaullism: Cold War Policies for the Post-Cold War World?' in Antonio Varsori (ed.), *Europe 1945-1990: the End of an Era?* (New York: St. Martin's Press 1994), 346–69; Jolyon Howorth, 'Discourse, Ideas, and Epistemic Communities in European Security and Defence Policy', *West European Politics*, 27/2 (2004) 211–34.

³¹Rebecca S. Moore, *NATO's New Mission. Projecting Stability in a Post-Cold War World* (Westport: Praeger 2007).

³²Beatrice Heuser, *Nuclear Mentalities? Strategies and Beliefs in Britain, France and the FRG* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 1998), 139–42

³³Bozo, *La France et l'OTAN*; Shaun Gregory, *French Defence Policy into the Twenty-First Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2000); Maurice Vaïsse, 'La France et l'OTAN: une Histoire', *Politique Étrangère*, 4 (2009), 861–72.

conceived was more an ideal than an achievable goal, and that smaller steps had to be envisioned instead.³⁴

Also, with multinational interventions becoming the new trend for Western states through a combination of normative pressures towards multilateralism and budgetary constraints,³⁵ the French armed forces had to learn how to cooperate with their partners, which highlighted the differences in strategic cultures,³⁶ the possibility of reform,³⁷ but also the potential for convergence with the armed forces of like-minded countries.³⁸ The nuclear order was also challenged, with new actors threatening traditional deterrence from the outside (by developing new capabilities including nuclear capabilities in some cases), or from below (by conducting actions below the threshold of triggering nuclear reactions).³⁹ Yet, despite the amplitude of the transformation of the international system, the seduction of 'autonomy' as an objective per se means that any change in the French security policy is judged according to the threshold of a romanticized Gaullism, which serves as a rhetorical resource to shame policies actors disagree with. This exercise is evenly spread on all sides of the political spectrum, thus validating de Gaulle's ironic formulation when he forecast that his legacy would be disputed by all political groups: 'everyone has been, is, or will be a Gaullist'. Currently, the new trend in French circles is to call Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Hollande's foreign policies 'neo-conservative' (in opposition to the 'Gaullo-Mitterrandists') because of their alleged militarism, although French military interventions abroad are numerically on decline compared with François Mitterrand or Jacques Chirac's terms in office.

Yet, a growing gap between the practice and the rhetoric of French security policy is observable, which leads observers to question the effectiveness of French diplomacy.⁴⁰ The constant reference to the French Cold War foreign and security policy, and subsequent shaming of any departure

³⁴Anan Menon, 'La Politique de Défense Européenne après le Traité de Lisbonne. Beaucoup de Bruit pour Rien', *Politique Étrangère* 2 (2011), 375–87; Stefanie Hofmann, *European Security in NATO's Shadow. Party Ideologies and Institution Building* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2013); Nicole Gnesotto, *Faut-il Enterrer la Défense Européenne?* (Paris: La Documentation Française 2014); Vivien Pertusot, 'Défense Européenne: Enfin du Renouveau', *Politique Étrangère*, 1 (2015), 11–23.

³⁵Sarah Kreps, *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Military Interventions after the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2011); Patricia E. Weitsman, *Waging War: Alliances, Coalitions and Institutions of Interstate Violence* (Palo Alto: Stanford UP 2013); Olivier Schmitt, *Allies that Count. Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, forthcoming in 2017).

³⁶Bastien Irondele and Olivier Schmitt, 'France', in Giegerich, Bastian, Heiko Biehl and Alexandra Jonas (eds.): *Strategic Cultures in Europe* (Munich: VS Verlag 2013), 125–38.

³⁷Terry Terriff, 'NATO Military Transformation: Challenges and Opportunities for France', *European Security* 19/1 (2010), 61–78.

³⁸Alice Pannier and Olivier Schmitt, 'Institutionalised Cooperation and Policy Convergence in European Defence: Lessons from the Relations between France, Germany and the United Kingdom', *European Security*, 23/3 (2014), 270–89.

³⁹Thérèse Delpech, *Nuclear Deterrence in the 21st Century. Lessons from the Cold War for a New Era of Strategic Piracy* (Santa Monica: Rand Corporation 2012).

⁴⁰Frédéric Charillon, *La France peut-elle encore Agir sur le Monde?* (Paris: Armand Colin 2010).

from it, is easily explainable by the absence of a new transpartisan grand narrative relevant for the contemporary international system, but overlooks the actual security policy changes France went through since the end of the Cold War and which are covered in this special issue. The first two articles explore France's integration within the transatlantic security landscape. Alice Pannier argues that Paris' relation with London and Washington has been profoundly transformed since the end of the Cold War, with France embracing in practice, if not in rhetoric, its integration within the western 'family'. Stephanie Hofmann shows that the 'Gaullist consensus' on NATO was not as widely shared as commonly thought and that party preferences matter in order to understand France's NATO policy, thus adding a welcome degree of granularity in the study of this troubled relationship. The third article explores a core issue of sovereignty: intelligence. Olivier Chopin links the evolution of the French intelligence laws with a radical transformation of the nature of the French polity, which is gradually moving from a centralized state-based system to a more traditional liberal model. This deep transformation of the French state explains a gradually evolving relationship with the way intelligence is conceived in the decision-making process, and thus the organization of intelligence agencies. Finally, the last two articles look at France at war, in order to dispel a number of common myths. Elie Tenenbaum shows that the development of a counter-insurgency doctrine in France, the UK and the US has very much been the result of a transatlantic circulation of knowledge since the end of the Second World War, and that the COIN communities of the three countries have always been integrated. Olivier Schmitt introduces the concept of 'selective emulation' in order to explain the French military change in Afghanistan, in particular through the observation of allies' best practices.

Overall, the contributions to this special issue shed a new light on France's security policies, as they provide empirical analyses of France's security practices without taking for granted the self-referential discourse of 'exceptionality' that too often serves as the starting point for analysis. It is time for such a dispassionate assessment, which shall be beneficial for France and her allies alike. Reluctant as she can sometimes be, France is an active member of the transatlantic security family.

Notes on contributor

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