

French Foreign Policy: An Indian View

Vasantha R. RAGHAVAN*

The foreign policy of every state is designed and practised to further its national interests. France's foreign policy is unique and characteristic in attempting to build a European identity in the global order. Official enunciation have emphasised the creation of a unified European economic area and the building of a European defence and security identity as being a central purpose of foreign policy. France's determined pursuit of autonomy in strategic affairs even as it remains a major partner in the transatlantic security arrangement, highlights the unique nature of its foreign policy.

The end of the Cold War and the wholly unpredictable nature of protecting national security interests after the terrorist attacks of September 2001, add a special interest to France's foreign policy. That policy has been variously perceived as original, innovative, individualistic, obstructionist, self centred and even self serving, depending on the contextual prisms through which it is viewed. It is however true to say that France and its leadership have demonstrated steadfastness in safeguarding national interests through a range of challenging changes in the international environment.

Is there an Indian perspective on France's foreign policy? Can such a perspective remain unrelated to Indian security interests? Are there lessons and insights in the continuing attempts of a middle power like France to retain and sustain a place amongst major powers? In a global order becoming increasingly interdependent through the globalisation process, foreign policy needs to account for co-operative and collaborative action on a wide range of national, regional and international agendas. The new threats to national security which have manifested in recent years require foreign policy to be adaptive in its practical nuances while retaining the core of its national purpose. This article

* Lieutenant General (Retd.) Vasantha R. Raghavan is Director of the Delhi Policy Group.

attempts to view France's foreign policy through the prism of Indian security interests.

Strategic Freedom in a Bipolar International Structure

It is useful to start by recalling the resounding phrases used by General de Gaulle when in 1966, he withdrew France from the military arm of the Atlantic Alliance while remaining its full member. *“France proposes to regain full sovereignty over its territory, currently undermined by the permanent presence of allied military units and their routine use of its airspace, to cease its participation in ‘integrated’ command, and no longer to put its forces at NATO disposal.”* It asserted a French foreign policy born out of the confidence of being a nuclear power but even more based on the nation's economic and institutional stability. That statement announced to the international polity France's claim to independence, power and grandeur. In that one statement, France set the terms of its participation in international order. France was to be counted henceforth as the determinant of its destiny instead of its destiny being shaped by any super power. That dramatic moment decided for successive French leaders the basis for France's foreign policy.

It may be said that France needed a De Gaulle to pull it out of the superpower orbit. The fact remains that the 1966 withdrawal from the military participation in NATO was preceded by a decade of economic and political regeneration in France. The Suez crisis of 1956 had left France and Britain open to nuclear threats from the Soviet Union. It had major doubts over United States (U.S.) willingness to back up its nuclear guarantees for the Atlantic Alliance. Britain chose to remedy this by strengthening its special relationship with the U.S. France chose to break free from U.S. guardianship of European security issues. There were transatlantic differences which had emerged in the 1960s on the question of deterrence. The U.S. had advocated ‘flexible response’ as a doctrine against the Warsaw Pact. That meant nuclear weapons were not going to be used even as European territory was under invasion. The hesitation

involved in this doctrine further eroded France's confidence in nuclear integration with NATO. While the bold and decisive decision on NATO was demonstrative of gaullist confidence, its operative approach was also marked by pragmatism. There was awareness in French policy circles of the unequal power status of the nation amongst major powers. Thus a style based on national pride and insouciance also blended with flexibility on issues where France could not disagree with allies on major international issues beyond a point. As De Gaulle himself explained in his memoirs, flexibility in operational terms of an independent policy was needed "*to disengage France, not from the Atlantic Alliance, which I intended to maintain by way of ultimate precaution, but from the integration realised by NATO under American command*".¹

A combination of political, economic and military confidence provided the foundation for France's assertion of its chosen place in the international power structure. Its North African colonial burdens having been shed, France's military was freed to play a meaningful part in the nation's territorial defence. France's size and military power potential made it possible to be confident in defending territorial integrity. The political divides arising from colonial possessions which had dissipated national energies had been turned into constructive assets. The economic growth trends were holding. The availability of nuclear weapons further sealed this belief. The conclusion is apparent that national security policies are as much dependent on political and economic strength as on military capabilities. The critical importance of resolving internal political dissension was essential to France if it was to take up a strong international position. It was equally important to have a sustained economic growth pattern to ensure political stability and military capability. If nuclear weapons were the key to strategic autonomy, their possession must remain independent of foreign control. The energy and vision invested by France, its attempts to integrate European countries into a viable group, has been its major achievement. Even as France was recovering from the adverse impact of the Second World War, it

¹ Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope*, trans. Terence Kilmartin, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1971.

had begun to exert towards a new international order through its attempts to integrate European states. The beginning was made through a steel and coal industry integration and continued through the major initiatives in resolving the differences with Germany. One can go so far as to say that the first fillip for Germany's unification came from France's building a new set of relations with the former. An integrated Europe in which France and Germany would be the two poles was a remarkable vision of sharing powers and responsibilities. That an integrated Europe would in itself become a pole in international order and a bulwark of independent action for peace and stability was an unprecedented visionary thought. France's initiatives to reach out to the Soviet Union at the height of the U.S.-U.S.S.R. confrontation were built through the space created for independent action through its innovative foreign policy. The moving away from regional integration by conquest to its economic and political variant, set into motion a new post War model of conducting international relations. It also included the underpinning of sentiment about France's rightful place as a power. If it bordered on ideas of France's grandeur it was part of the gaullist plan.² The relevance of these critical dimensions of foreign and security policy have not been missed by Indian strategic analysts.

Multipolarity in the Post Cold War Period

The end of the Cold War has placed all states and nations in an entirely new frame of international relations. This has demanded rapid adaptation in planning and conduct of foreign policy. Even as the Cold War was beginning to unravel there were trends that could be noticed influencing the international outlook. These trends were about to have a cumulative impact on the international state of affairs. One set of trends related to contradictions inherent in the economic and social dimensions. Contradictions of economic globalisation *versus* fragmentation of ethnic societies have affected Europe as much as other regions of the world. Even as a long era of peace between the two Cold War

² Stanley Hoffman, *Decline or Renewal? France Since the 1930s*, New York, Viking, 1974.

blocks benefited humanity, there were conflicts being played out in all parts of the world. There was the growing contradiction between prosperity in some parts of the world against increasing poverty in larger parts of the globe. There was the pressure of antagonisms that continued to affect international stability. While states—particularly in the developed parts—began to integrate into regional and economic groups, some were disintegrating along ethnic and communal lines. Europe itself was affected by it. As states which integrated had begun to soften their positions on national sovereignty, there were instances of military intervention into states which were unable to govern themselves effectively. The antagonism between the consolidation of military and nuclear capability of some states against the possibility of nuclear proliferation by others was a marked one. The impact of emphatic assertion of cultural identity by some groups affected the cohesion of multi-cultural societies. As one analyst opined, “*only when one or more of these tendencies wins out will our era gain a name of its own, displacing the awkward post Cold War tag*”.³

France was affected by and closely involved in managing the fallout of the contradictions and antagonisms in and outside Europe. In peacekeeping operations as well as in restoring order in states which threatened to get out of hand, France played a meaningful role during the 1990s. Simultaneously with the contradictions-antagonisms interplay, there was a major shift from the military dimension of power to its economic components. New economic powers had emerged and there are today a number of potential economic powers. One calculation has it that by 2010 nine of the fifteen economic powers would be from the current list of developing states. The Gulf War against Iraq showed up the economic dimensions of waging a high technology war. Military power for that war had to be supported by massive financial inputs from economic powers. Thus, a new order was emerging where military capability without a substantial economic back up was going to be an inadequate source of power. The possibility of a global order comprising more than one pole of power was

³ Richard Haas, “What to do with American Primacy”, *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 1999.

on the horizon. This possibility has been viewed by France as a constructive development capable of contributing to political and security stability.

The end of the Cold War left the U.S. as the single most powerful economic, technological and military power. That unique status brought forth a series of security initiatives from Washington. The eastwards expansion of NATO, a new outlook on arms control arrangements with Russia, a dramatic shift away from the ABM Treaty towards missile defence arrangements and a penchant for unilateral military action formed the matrix of post Cold War U.S. policies. The consultative content of the transatlantic security arrangement had begun to fray in the face of a U.S. which now operated from a new set of power projection perspectives. The end of the Cold War also led to de-escalation of security alert status between the U.S. and Russia. A substantial reduction in military strength and nuclear alert levels had come about. Nuclear de-alerting had brought about a new dimension to long held notions of nuclear deterrence. Nuclear risks had shifted from hair trigger alerts and tightly controlled tactical nuclear weapons to risks of their falling into wrong hands.

The traumatic terrorist attacks of September 2001 added a whole new set of unexpected dimensions to security management. The realisation that henceforth no state's territory can be immune to large scale attacks has led to a range of new developments. First of all, the need to co-operate and collaborate against international terrorism, has become an accepted doctrine. No state can fight terrorism on its own particularly in an era of terrorists working without borders and using the benefits of economic integration, information technology skills and free movement of human and financial resources. The limited ability of traditional and nuclear military power against non state actors has led to unpredictable results. Since non state players cannot be targeted through traditional instruments of deterrence or coercion, a pattern of targeting states who support, harbour and train them is now becoming an acceptable option. The disturbing dimension in this lies in the authority to make such decisions. Should these be collective decisions obtained through the United Nations or should these be unilateral ones taken by one or more states capable of

international military action? The trend of unilateral decisions and action by one or more countries has become an issue of discord even amongst the friends and admirers of the U.S.

France's position on building a multipolar world has assumed some importance in the light of developments described above. The argument in favour of multipolarity has been carefully crafted as a constructive initiative. It is in consonance with France's well known approach to European integration and its own need to retain room for manoeuvre in international affairs. Hubert Védrine, the former Foreign Minister, described the U.S. as a "*hyperpower*". He clarified it to be a statement of the reality of U.S.' undisputed dominance and not as criticism. "*The U.S. also remains a central and major factor in international stability. Nevertheless, this unipolar system is excessive, questionable and has negative implications, including for the U.S. That is why we are determined to work for a multipolar world which exists potentially.*"⁴ Mr. Védrine went on to list the conditions for the emergence of a multipolar world. A strong Europe is the first condition and that is why France is working to make Europe an integrated market and currency entity. In France's view, the poles which would emerge should not oppose each other but maintain co-operative relations. In order to develop this multipolarity, France has undertaken a dialogue process with all major states and with Japan, India, Brazil, Mercosur and South Africa, etc. In the multipolar arrangement India is viewed by France as a major partner. France has emphasised that a multipolar system should be combined with an improved version of multilateralism.

In its pursuit of national interests seen as part of a multipolar system of states, France has responded to developing situations with a combination of persuasion, insistence and co-operation. It can be best explained by the phrase "continuing adaptation".⁵ It is useful to analyse French policy responses to two amongst the major developments in the post Cold War period. They have a

⁴ Hubert Védrine, *Franco-Indian Seminar, India and France in a Multipolar World*, 16-17 February 2000, Manohar, Centre de Sciences humaines, 2002, New Delhi.

⁵ Frédéric Bozo, *Two Strategies for Europe*, Lanham (USA), Rowman & Littlefield, 2001

bearing on Indian perceptions of France's foreign policy imperatives, notwithstanding claims to work towards a multipolar world.

The transatlantic policies of France were inevitably affected by the Cold War's ending. It raised dilemmas arising from the fulfilled hopes. If the blocks of East and West had ended should France work for a stronger Alliance or should it respond to the reality of the east west confrontation having come to end! The US had come up with a new variant Atlantic relationship involving expanding NATO eastwards to the borders of Russia. It was also insisting on new roles for NATO through "*out of area operations*". Should France endorse the new leadership role being sought by the U.S. in Europe? It would imply a dilution of the position in Europe which France had built up so assiduously. Events in the Balkans eroded the image of a strong Europe willing and capable of exerting in European security affairs. France could not by itself help in the matter due to positions taken by other European states on the Bosnian issue. France's acceptance of a Europe as part of Europe in NATO rather than Europe as Pole in its own right showed the limits of the multipolar ambitions. In 1996, France made a policy turn about and accepted a place—albeit limited—in the NATO military structures it had so imperiously turned away from in 1966.

On the question of missile defence France had led an European response against both the concept and the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty. There is no doubt that European and U.S. threat perceptions on missile threats are different. U.S.' global military reach would justify protecting its forces from missile based WMD threats. How does France cope with this other than by compromising on threat assessments? In a perceptive analysis, Thérèse Delpech has termed this French policy dilemma in terms of a Transatlantic Deal on Missile Defence.⁶ She raises pertinent questions about whether Europe should undertake a new threat assessment and if closer co-operation with the U.S. and Russia be given a closer look. She suggests developing a broader European strategic outlook to be able to accommodate US global compulsions.

Where does all this leave France's notions of a European pole in international security matters?

What about France's position on the value of nuclear deterrent in the new global security scenario? France differs with the U.S. on the de-emphasised role of nuclear weapons in the current global threat scene. It is unwilling to consider a 'no first use' policy nor is it stepping back from the primacy of nuclear over the conventional deterrence. On arms control issues, France has declared, not without justification, that its arsenals are not of the level of the U.S. and Russia to warrant any reductions. Yet it has strictly enforced a silence in public discourse on nuclear war fighting. As one analyst puts it, "*French nuclear strategy has become an all-azimuth one*".⁷ It would be of interest to highlight that Indian nuclear policy assumptions are not different from this approach of France.

Indian Perspectives on France

It should be made clear that an Indian perspective on France's foreign and security policy will be one seen through the prism of Indian foreign and security policy needs. Just as France evolved its policies through an understanding of its world view, India and Indian observers view French policies primarily through an Indian outlook on the post-Cold-War world. Indian political leadership's stentorian claims after the 1998 Indian nuclear tests that India's size and capability demands attention from global powers, was not different from those of France when it tested its nuclear weapons.⁸ The Indian position is not very different from Charles de Gaulle's arguments in his *Memorandum* of September 1958 in which he implied the need to have a general (*as distinct from a US-UK*)

⁶ Thérèse Delpech, "A New Trans-Atlantic Deal on Missile Defense?", *Pugwash Occasional Papers*, March 2002.

⁷ Bruno Tertrais, *The French Nuclear Deterrent After the Cold War*, Santa Monica (USA), RAND, 1998.

⁸ Jaswant Singh, "Against Nuclear Apartheid", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 77, No 5, September–October 1998.

*“accord on world, political and strategic problems...”*⁹ [italics added]. Indian admiration for the positions France adopted since 1958 through the *force de frappe* and Intermediate Nuclear Forces as well as on disarmament issues is not apparent to most but is not inconsiderable. France’s nuclear doctrine in relation to potential adversaries, on unacceptable damage to be inflicted against nuclear weapons users, and on the nature of a nuclear force are not very different from the those of India.

India has gone beyond French nuclear positions to pledge a No First Use caveat. There are more than mere moral grounds for this confidence on No First Use. Indian planners believe that its minor nuclear adversary Pakistan is incapable of obtaining a decisive outcome in a conventional military campaign. India therefore does not require the use of nuclear weapons against Pakistan unless the latter brings it into play first. As for the major nuclear adversary China, Indian assumptions are founded not only on its own military capabilities in the high Himalayas but also on what the PLA can achieve in conventional military campaign from the Tibetan plateau. There is confidence that a Chinese offensive will not obtain the kind of successes gained in the War of 1962. On the other hand No First Use has been termed a blind alley and which as a universal, unconditional, permanent promise ought not to find favour.¹⁰ That analysis misses the point of India attempting to cover new nuclear ground by positing a military—moral dimension to its nuclear policy. The similarity between France and India on the essential interplay of military power and the totality of national power in obtaining space for strategic manoeuvre should not be lost sight of.

The question what do nuclear weapons portend for the stability of the South Asian region and in global terms has evoked diverse opinions. At one end is the guaranteed instability point of view. This is best summarised by the following assessment: *“The most important issue of the 21st century is to understand how*

⁹ Maurice Couve de Murville, quoted in Cyrus L. Sulzberger, *The Last of the Giants*, New York, Macmillan, 1970.

nationalism combines with the newly destructive tendencies appearing in Asia. If energies in these examples become harnessed to this firepower, then the world could be in a very dangerous era that the West is ill prepared to understand."¹¹ There is another mature opinion from France that takes account of nuclear rationality quotient operating in South Asia, and opines that, "*the strategic communities of the new nuclear states are cognisant of deterrence theory, and their political and military masters do not have prima facie reasons for departing from a deterrence stand*".¹²

French official position on India's nuclear policy and doctrine has been subtly different and understated, and yet clear enough about the dangers inherent in the India-Pakistan stand-off. The essential difference between the two South Asian nuclear adversaries is one of governing principles. India carries the conviction of and conducts its affairs through a democratic process. That in itself imposes norms and conditions on use of military power. Pakistan on the other hand is governed through militarism. In other words, the military establishment's interests are placed above those of the people of Pakistan. This is a unique model of nuclear adversarial relations not hitherto seen. The importance of democracy as guarantor of security is a dimension which has been rightly emphasised by thinkers from France. "*European and Indians probably share the thought that there are values superior to the state, that law should be respected and that power is as relative as all other human inventions. We both respect our citizens and adhere to the provisions of international treaties we have signed... The largest advance in human well being involves the explosion of freedom. And to empower people might be seen as the main goal in the years to come to become a major power in the next century*", is a call which only the French could give.¹³ The same author is however constrained to state that "*Europeans have lost the sense of their global role to such a degree that they can only take*

¹⁰ Sir Michael Quinlan, "Thinking About Nuclear Weapons", London, RUSI *Whitehall Paper Series*, 1997.

¹¹ Paul Bracken, "Asia's Militaries and the New Nuclear Age", *Current History*, December 1999.

¹² Francis Heisbourg, "The Prospects for Nuclear Stability between India and Pakistan", *Survival*, Winter 1998-1999.

¹³ Thérèse Delpech, *op. cit.* [4].

a backseat in international affairs, including, despite their claims to the contrary, in the fight against non proliferation".¹⁴ In France itself, "nobody even knows what gaullism means anymore, apart from being able to say no to the United States".¹⁵ One can therefore rightly wonder about the reality of France's desire to make Europe a pole in the global order!

One must also take into account Indian perceptions of the limits to France's ability to work out a multipolar world order, and for that matter its willingness to get the required space to assert itself in the process. Certainly in the war against terrorism, France has taken positions which strengthen the case of those who scoff at its claims to leading the multipolarity campaign. The example of France's position in the face of the U.S.–Russia entente which will affect global power structures to the potential detriment of Europe, is a good example. Europeans and other states including India have already seen how the entente works. The once vocal opposition from Paris to U.S. missile defence and ABM Treaty withdrawal collapsed, once President Putin made it clear Russia would not object too strongly. The same now applies to military action against Iraq. There is enough European talk of what to do about the paradox of American military power.¹⁶ Yet it is widely believed that France will be unlikely to stand aside from a US decision on attacking Iraq. There is in fact belief amongst Indian analysts that France will in due course, form part of the attack.¹⁷ Russian acquiescence to military action against Iraq would seal France's position towards approving such action. Thus to quote syndicated columnist Jim Hoagland, Russia would have "leapfrogged" Europe to come closer to the US.¹⁸ So much for multipolar pretensions, as some Indian analysts of France's policy would say. Even on as small an issue as an adverse travel advisory on India

¹⁴ Thérèse Delpech, "Nuclear Weapons: A New Great Debate", EUI-SS, *Chaillot Papers* 48, July 2001.

¹⁵ Dominique Moïsi, "The Trouble with France", *Foreign Affairs*, May–June 1998.

¹⁶ Julian Lindley-French, "Terms of Engagement—The Paradox of American Power and the transatlantic dilemma post 11 September", EUI-SS, *Chaillot Papers* 52, May 2002.

¹⁷ C. Raja Mohan, "US Aims to reorder West Asia: News Analysis", *The Hindu*, September 23, 2002 (New Delhi).

¹⁸ Jim Hoagland, "Bush-Putin reshaping global power", *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, July 28, 2002. At: <http://www.seattlepi.nwsourc.com>.

during May June 2002, France followed suit the U.S. actions. This left Indians wondering more than worrying about France's claim to independent decision making. It is another matter that more calls came to the French Embassy in New Delhi from France, inquiring about French citizens in India, than the numbers who either cancelled visits or left India heeding the advisory.

Indian perceptions of France's foreign and security policies would be wholly determined by the positions the latter takes on Indian security anxieties. Jammu and Kashmir and the military led Pakistan's determination to keep a conflict environment at high tension levels is and will remain the primary Indian security concern. India is not in doubt on Pakistan's role in international terrorism. Pakistan's involvement in the modern face of terrorism as the instrument of mass destruction is clear to all. Its military was closely involved in creating, nurturing and sustaining international terrorism from the soil of Pakistan. The military in Pakistan had sought to make Afghanistan its strategic depth for international terrorism. Pakistani military is committed to undoing India as a secular and democratic state through communally oriented terrorism. Indian perceptions of France will in the near and medium future will be based on the latter's actions. After the terrorist attacks on French naval technicians in Karachi this year against international terrorism. France's official response was muted and even aimed at keeping the terrorism dimensions off the French public view. It was seen in India as an attempt to place military hardware sales at a higher level of importance than the war against terrorism. These actions were no doubt driven by French national interests. They nevertheless place serious doubts on Paris' commitment to the lofty ideals it preaches to those carrying the burden of terrorism and an iniquitous global order. That is more than enough to gravely debilitate the impact of the slew of events, meetings, visits and seminars, cited by both governments as evidence of greater Franco-Indian strategic co-operation.

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Conclusion

There is much admiration in India for France and its attempts to steer an independent foreign and security policy. That endeavour by France both in European affairs and in establishing a unique relationship in the Atlantic Alliance, has been watched with high regard by Indian policy planners and analysts. France's nuclear policies and its relationship with NATO have much that is relevant to India after its 1998 nuclear tests. There have been serious attempts to forge a new France—Indian relationship based on strategic realities of the post-Cold War era, and particularly after India declared itself a nuclear weapons state. The events of September 2001 have further enhanced this need. Notwithstanding these positive elements in the Indian perceptions of France, there is much that is cause for disquiet and lack of credibility about the latter's commitment to the causes it professes. In the doctrine of a multipolar global order, France has both led the discourse and set the direction. In implementing this approach in a post Cold War global structure, however, France is increasingly being viewed in India, as an often reluctant, but eventual adherent of the existing unipolar arrangement.