

Leading on the Cheap? French Security Policy in Austerity

Who would have predicted in early 2011—just before the Libya operation was decided—that cash-strapped, inwardly-focused, soul-searching France would embark over the next two years on a flurry of military operations and bold strategic moves? These included a de facto regime change in Libya, ousting former President Gbagbo in Ivory Coast, recapturing Northern Mali and destroying a jihadist sanctuary, and supporting the Free Syrian Army, not to mention other minor operations such as reinforcing its presence in the Central African Republic. Even in France, many of those who supported continuing a strong interventionist policy were surprised. How can one explain this phenomenon? Can France really afford to remain a global power at a time when the Hollande administration is imposing some of the heaviest cuts ever in budgetary expenses?

I argue that French security policy has been displaying more continuity than change; that Paris, along with London, is currently filling in the void left by a more restrained U.S. policy; and that despite budget cuts, France will still be willing and able to intervene in defense of its interests and values.

First Impressions of Hollande: More Continuity than Change

One year after François Hollande was elected president in May 2012, one thing had become clear: France's first Socialist President since 1988 would not

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Paris and London are filling the void left by a more restrained United States.

revolutionize French security and defense policy. To be sure, Hollande had announced during the 2011–2012 presidential campaign his intention to withdraw French forces from Afghanistan and make some adjustments to defense policy—such as revitalizing European defense cooperation. But his only major speech on the subject emphasized much

more continuity with his predecessors' policies than change. He also clearly distanced himself from some of his more radical political allies by announcing that he would fully maintain and modernize the country's nuclear deterrent, and would not choose the military budget as the cash cow to reduce the budget deficit.¹

Two basic principles marked Hollande's outlook on foreign and security policy. One was that he clearly wanted a break with the style and conduct of his predecessor's policies: he sought to be more austere but at the same time more consistent. (Sarkozy was perceived to be prone to abrupt changes and reorientations in foreign policy.) Another was that given his inexperience in international affairs and defense (even though he had been a member of the National Assembly's Defense Committee), he would be cautious, pragmatic, and rather conservative, as had been his Socialist predecessor François Mitterrand (1981–1995).

Thus, Hollande introduced few major substantive changes from Sarkozy's policies. The newly-elected president immediately signaled his intention to retain a strong relationship with the United States, and stated that he would not reverse the Sarkozy 2008 decision to rejoin the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) military command.² He commissioned a report on France's relationship with NATO to former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine, who unsurprisingly recommended staying the course and making the best of the new French role.³ At the Chicago Summit immediately after his election, Hollande insisted, just like his predecessor had, on the importance of NATO to remain a nuclear alliance. He accepted the ongoing development of the allied missile-defense system on five conditions, which were rather classic from the French standpoint: it should complement, not substitute, nuclear deterrence; political control should oversee its use; French industry should have freedom to participate in the project; costs should be acceptable; and dialogue with Moscow should continue.⁴

The only alteration Hollande made to French policy was to move the timetable of withdrawing French forces from Afghanistan forward by one year, to December 2012 (which, given the logistical difficulties, he quickly adjusted to withdrawing all “combat troops” by the end of the year). He also returned to a

classic French stance by emphasizing that peacekeeping and humanitarian operations should only move forward with a UN Security Council mandate—whereas Sarkozy had been tempted, occasionally, to discard such an obligation.

On Iran, Hollande stayed the steady course chartered under Chirac in the beginning of the previous decade: strong sanctions were the least-worse solution and France would retain a key role in the group of “P5+1” (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). He refrained from any public dramatization of the Iranian issue, something Sarkozy was sometimes prone to.

On Syria too, he chose continuity: Hollande had stated during the campaign that he could subscribe to the idea of a foreign military intervention in the country’s civil war, given a UN mandate to that effect. It thus came as no surprise that France recognized the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate government in November 2012, and that two years after the beginning of the Syrian insurrection, in March 2013, Paris announced that it would seek the lifting of the EU arms embargo (a European decision was taken to that effect on May 28).

The Syrian crisis showed another element of continuity: a willingness to act without waiting for Washington to lead (even at the risk of appearing to force the U.S. hand and displease the White House), but to do so mostly in cooperation with London, as had happened with Libya. France also coordinated with the United Kingdom in its proposal to lift the EU arms embargo to Syria.⁵ Indeed, cooperation with Britain is very important for France. During Sarkozy’s mandate, the UK–French defense and security partnership tightened with the 2010 Lancaster House Treaty, an historic 50-year agreement involving military cooperation and sharing nuclear secrets. For himself, Hollande acknowledged that the United Kingdom remained France’s natural military partner even if the two countries strongly disagreed on many other European affairs such as financial matters, economic policies, and EU political integration.

Of course, the change of personal style in presidential diplomacy was not trivial. For instance, by deliberately refraining from seeking a close personal relationship with Russia—something that was apparent during his first trip to Moscow in March 2013—Hollande signaled that under his leadership, France would be less tolerant toward authoritarianism. But all in all, it is hard to see where France’s strategic choices would have been radically different had Sarkozy been reelected.

The Mali Surprise

Mali had been on the French strategic radar for a long time, given its location on the new drug trafficking routes (cocaine from Latin America principally) and the

presumed presence of French hostages in the region. The presence of jihadists in the country—many of them coming from Algeria—had also been known since the mid-2000s. Events accelerated in February 2012 when rebels began attacking the Malian government to attain the independence of northern Mali, an area known as Azawad. A group called the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) organized most of the attacks, made up in large part by a traditionally nomadic tribe called the Tuareg but also joined by jihadist forces.

By April, MNLA-led forces had overthrown the government and declared the independent state of Azawad, although no other country recognized the state. In early summer 2012, jihadist forces and the MNLA turned on each other, and the jihadists began recapturing the north for themselves. By late summer, jihadist forces had completely taken over northern Mali. Although the Libyan war was not a direct cause of the events, it had added fuel to a threatening fire with the return of Malian mercenaries and the flow of Libyan weaponry onto the African black market. (However, there was no evidence of the presence in Mali of large arsenals of heavy weapons of Libyan origin.)

In his first major foreign policy speech in August 2012, Hollande stated that he was “highly preoccupied” by the situation in the Sahel: “a self-proclaimed terrorist entity has established itself in northern Mali; it defies our interests, our values, our population.”⁶ Paris sought an international, African-led intervention to restore the integrity of the Malian state, and secured a UNSC resolution to that effect in December 2012. Estimates said such a force could not effectively form for several months, but even given this timetable France publicly ruled out a national operation at that time (though Hollande had reportedly requested contingency planning to that effect as early as October, in case the jihadists moved south).⁷

In early January 2013, however, two columns of jihadist forces (about 1,000 fighters) launched a rapid offensive toward the south. Paris had a genuine fear that the collapse of the Malian army might mean the rebels could rapidly gain control of the airport of Sévaré (which was needed for the planned international operation) and even reach Bamako, the capital, in a matter of days. Even if the jihadists had not reached these targets, their initiative could have led to the final crumbling of the state—either jihadist elements that were already powerful in the south would have gradually taken over the entire country, or the country would divide with the Army taking power in Bamako.⁸

On January 11, Hollande announced the launch of a French operation at the request of the Malian president (thus in the name of collective self-defense), officially designed to protect the existence of the state and the safety of its population as well as of French nationals in the country.⁹ The next day, a reevaluation of the local situation led to a decision to turn the operation into a significant ground offensive.¹⁰ The French Operation Serval (named for the

African wildcat) began immediately, taking advantage of an already significant ground presence in Ivory Coast and Burkina-Faso, an air presence in Chad, and contingency planning already in place. The first airstrikes, a mere three hours after the order was given on January 11, quickly stopped the jihadist columns. But Paris remained remarkably silent about its exact operational goals (and allowed little media presence) in order to keep the terrorists guessing. The French forces gained control of the main Malian towns on the Niger River, one by one. Then, in February, they took the fight to the desert regions of northeastern Mali—most terrorists were fleeing and hiding in the Timetrine plains and the Adrar des Ifoghas, a rugged, mountainous area of about 250,000 square kilometers. The French strategy successfully focused on destroying the groups' logistics and bases.

By early April, more than 4,000 French troops were in Mali and in the region, alongside 6,300 African forces. These included 4,300 forces of the Nigeria-led International Support Mission to Mali (AFISMA) deployed by the Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS), which was planned to reach ultimately 8,000 troops and also included 2,000 experienced and efficient Chadian forces. French forces also included about 15 fighter-bombers, 20 helicopters, and an important contingent of special forces, which played a key role in the campaign. The nominally 4,800-strong Malian army was pressed to play a visible role for political reasons, but its actual operational strength had been reduced to about 2,500.¹¹ Before the French operation, the jihadist forces fighters numbered 2,000–3,000.¹² Half of them are subsequently reported to have been killed, the remaining having fled or mingled with the local populations.¹³

In sum, France had in fact embarked in its own “local war on terror.” For some, the similarities with the 2001 U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan were troubling. Neighboring Algeria, from which al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) had emerged, was to Mali what Pakistan had been to Afghanistan, and the Adrar des Ifoghas was the equivalent of the Tora Bora Mountains. But fortunately, the comparison ends quickly. The regime was not a threat, the Tuareg were a de facto ally (and a minority in Mali), Algeria turned out to be helpful, and France was familiar with the terrain.¹⁴ The final fight in al-Qaeda's dugout was rather successful due to a French–Chadian pincer maneuver, which led to the jihadist forces to be boxed in in their mountain dugout.

From a strategic standpoint, the idea was to defeat the main jihadist groups—both Arab (AQIM and its offshoot, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in Western Africa (MUJWA)) as well as Tuareg (the powerful Ansar Dine

France effectively embarked in its own local war on terror in Mali.

movement)—while trying to reinsert the MNLA in the mainstream Malian political game. Over 50 jihadist shelters and more than ten bomb-making workshops were reportedly discovered in the northeast during the February/March operations.¹⁵ Jihadist losses were estimated in mid-March to be several hundreds.¹⁶ In early April, a second “sweeping” operation was conducted, this time mostly against the MUJWA, north of Gao.

As of late spring 2013, considerable uncertainties remain about the future of Mali and of the ability of France and its partners to fully restore the integrity of the state or ensure long-term stability. The French attempts to reintegrate the MNLA in Malian politics are also questionable, given the group’s lack of popularity in the country. And no hostages have been freed despite suspicions that some of them are located in the Ifoghas.¹⁷

However, from a strictly military standpoint, things could hardly have gone better. Like the French Operation Harmattan in Libya, Serval in Mali confirmed that after two decades of reforms, Paris has gained a very efficient power projection capability. Serval showed the French armed forces at their best: on a continent that they know well, with operations that they are most familiar (including counterterrorism, for which a decade in Afghanistan certainly helped), capable of fast tactical moves over long distances, swift action with a strong level of jointness, and in direct contact with the local population. The ability to conduct major helicopter operations in support of ground offensives—just like in Libya—as well as airborne operations (250 troops were parachuted on Timbuktu) were particularly noted.

France believed that it was doing the right thing, both for Mali and for Western interests. It was disappointed to see that concrete allied support for its action was slow to come and remained rather limited. No Western country contributed to forces on the ground; U.S. support was strong on intelligence, but Paris had to twist the White House’s arm to get refueling and airlift assistance.¹⁸ (French officials regretted before the operation that Washington did not consider that jihadists in the Sahel were a threat to U.S. interests.)¹⁹ Seven European nations gave airlift and refueling support. Still, Paris was disappointed with the paucity of EU commitment for training African troops and for force protection of the EU Training Mission (EUTM), whose goal is to train 3,000 Malian soldiers. France plans to leave 1,000 soldiers at the end of 2013, most of them as a rapid reaction force, others in the planned UN operation.²⁰

The Roots of French Interventionism

In the spring of 2013, France had more than 10,000 soldiers in foreign interventions, most of them in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Africa (about 7,000 in Mali, Chad, Ivory Coast, and the Central African Republic). In addition,

Paris had a military presence of nearly 4,000 on bases in Djibouti, Gabon, Senegal, and the United Arab Emirates. Finally, its presence worldwide also includes bases and permanent deployments of 9,000 in French overseas departments and communities.²¹ How should one explain this flurry of military initiatives in such dire economic times?

It is not about strategic designs based on grandeur, or the need to balance Germany (Paris would actually have loved more involvement by Berlin in crisis management of Europe's neighborhood). Nor is it a way to bolster domestic standing: French presidents know that any boost in their popularity given by military adventures is only temporary, and that during a crisis, citizens can blame their leaders for concentrating too much on foreign policy issues. The Hollande decision on Mali came on the very day an historic agreement on domestic labor market reform was signed; no doubt the French president would have preferred the media to concentrate on this success.

It also is not a desire to secure control of energy sources and raw materials in former colonies. Libya was not a former colony and its trade with France was limited. (Just like in the case of Iraq for the United States, French access to Libyan oil and markets would have been easier under Gaddafi.) Securing Nigerian uranium is an important French interest; four of the seven French hostages in the Sahel were Areva (a French nuclear energy firm) employees abducted in Niger. But Mali does not have any significant resources beyond gold, and Syria is neither a major oil supplier nor a promising new market. French special forces have been deployed to help the Nigerian army to secure the uranium mines, but this was by fear of jihadist reprisals.²²

Regarding Mali, the fate of the local populations and French nationals (about 6,000) was a primary consideration in Hollande's decision to intervene. But behind this immediate reason lay a genuine fear of a possible narco-terrorist or "islamo-gangsterist" state in Europe's neighborhood, which could have expanded into a broader "Sahelistan." The presence of several French hostages in the region was also a key consideration. Freeing them was not the primary goal of the intervention, even though several of them were suspected to be in the northeast, but disrupting the local thriving business of hostage-taking was at least on the agenda.

Perhaps the dominant incentive in Parisian decision-making circles was that here was an opportunity to "break AQIM's back," to use an expression widely employed in the defense establishment. AQIM, an offshoot of the Algerian civil war, had been an enemy of France even before its allegiance to al-Qaeda in 2007. Its previous incarnation, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GCSP), had targeted French assets since the early 1990s. Simply put, this was the opportunity to weaken the only declared adversary of the French state, which had attempted since 2009 to strike Europe three times.²³ Estimates say that

90 percent of AQMI's revenues since 2009 came from hostage-taking, enough that Hollande had decided the government would no longer pay ransoms.²⁴

History and strategic culture, along with a worldwide presence and a major contribution to international organizations, have contributed to the French strategic outlook. This includes an acute threat perception in French decision-making circles about terrorism, drug-trafficking, the need to protect expatriates, nuclear and ballistic proliferation, and the risk of disruption of energy flows. France continues to believe that it has global responsibilities due to its permanent status at the UN Security Council, and also that it can be a force for good by defending

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universal values. French diplomatic strategy has less cynicism than what some believe: in Libya, Mali, and Syria, the need to protect civilian populations was a key driver. (A frequent criticism is that France fights extremists in Mali while supporting them in Syria, but Paris makes a distinction between jihadist terrorists in Africa and embattled Islamists in the Middle East.) Since the end of the Cold war, France has been promoting the idea of humanitarian interventions.

French strategy, of course, contains a strong element of realism. Despite a growing interest in Asia, the French strategic focus remains on Europe's neighborhood: North and West Africa as well as the Middle East are where European primary interests lie, and where Paris has kept strong economic, cultural, and political ties. (Ivory Coast, Mali, and Syria are all former French colonies.) The continuation of a strong permanent presence there is a consequence of Africa's inability to police the continent itself, despite two decades of Western assistance to its armed forces, and of the perennial instability of many African states. For instance, continuing a 25-year old "temporary" presence in Chad is judged necessary to avoid the collapse of the state. Paris no longer supports endangered dictators in former colonies, and its defense agreements have been revised to that effect. When the Central African Republic president called for help in early 2013, for example, French forces did not intervene; and when he was toppled on March 24, they only acted to protect their nationals. But maintaining bases in Africa requires good relations with sometimes unsavory regimes.

A key additional factor to explain the recent French interventionism is the U.S. attitude. In the post-Iraq and Afghanistan context, Washington is more reluctant to intervene militarily in crises that are not vital for its own interests. That has left Paris (and London) in the driver's seat in Libya and in Syria. In a sense, France is leading by default, and a dominant feature of French strategy in

the past three years has been to lead to the point of appearing to force Washington's hand. Though France would have intervened in Libya (with the United Kingdom) and in Mali without U.S. assistance, and does not seek Washington's approval for its stance on Syria, it clearly welcomes U.S. support and acknowledges that U.S.–UK–French solidarity can be a game-changer in international crises. This is not unlike the situation in the early 1990s, when Paris and London were in a leadership position in the Balkans: few remember that European impetus in the spring of 1995 was key to NATO action in the former Yugoslavia.

The 2013 White Paper Decisions

The Mali operation came in the midst of drafting a new White Paper on Defense and National Security. Hollande had made the decision to write a new White Paper during the presidential campaign. This was not only to distance himself from Sarkozy, who had produced his own ambitious White Paper in 2008; in addition, he judged that the financial crisis (with its domestic and international repercussions) and the Arab Spring, to say nothing of the evolutions of U.S. strategy, warranted another bottom-up defense and security review.

The Mali operation was consistent with what the drafters of the White Paper had begun to suggest as strategic priorities for the next five years. The Sarkozy White Paper had sought to reduce the permanent French presence in Africa, but demands by local leaders and fears for the stability of some states, such as Chad, had stymied these plans. As a consequence, and given the growing worries about the Sahel region, it had already been suggested that Africa would remain a priority even before Hollande launched the Mali operation. Serval confirmed the benefits of having prepositioned forces when a crisis occurred requiring quick reaction. Despite French efforts over the past two decades to both “Africanize” and “Europeanize” its military operations on the continent, Paris often remains in the driver's seat when it comes to securing the northern half of Africa.

After the April 2013 White Paper, defense expenditure will remain steady, though not untouched. Hollande decided even before his election that the defense budget was key to preserving France's interests and ambitions, and was essential to its high-tech industry. Still, a cardinal justification for defense cuts was that reducing public debt was also a matter of ensuring sovereignty (60 percent of French debt is foreign-owned, as opposed to 30 percent for the United States and the United Kingdom). The budget for 2013 was €31.4 billion, including exceptional revenues. Though the White Paper announced only the global defense expenditure (€179.2 billion 2013 for 2014–2019),²⁵ the budget is expected to be maintained in volume in 2014 and 2015, though this will amount to a yearly reduction (of 1 to 2 percent) due to inflation. In 2016 and 2017, the

budget will remain stable in real terms. Then, in 2018 and 2019, once fiscal balance has been restored, a 1 percent yearly increase in real terms is planned.²⁶

The White Paper included a roughly 15 percent cut, on average, of several major capabilities such as combat ground forces, destroyers, and fighter-bombers.²⁷ It discarded the 2008 ambition to deploy up to 30,000 troops and 70 combat aircraft for a year, which was already out of reach. This was not only a consequence of budget cuts—it was judged that the probability of a major land–air battle was now low, and that coercion operations would rely less on numbers than in the past. France will be able to deploy a joint force of one Army brigade, a dozen combat aircraft, and one submarine for long-duration operations; or a force of at least two Army brigades, at least 45 combat aircraft, and a maritime task force for a major coercion operation. In addition, a newly created small joint immediate reaction force will remain on permanent alert.

Beyond the European neighborhood, strategic evolutions in Asia are emphasized as very important for Europe, but the French military involvement in the region will be mostly limited to intelligence. The three bases in Africa (see above) will be maintained.

Where Is France Heading?

France's conundrum, thinly disguised in the 2013 White Paper, is that in a time of limited resources it can hardly count on its European and NATO allies for material support in non-collective defense operations. In particular, the Serval operation confirmed what many in the French security establishment feared: U.S. support—

U.S. support—never mind leadership—for European crisis management is no longer a given.

to say nothing of leadership—for crisis management around Europe is no longer a given.

Does this mean that new budget reductions will imply a reduced French interventionism? Clearly, pressure will increase on its ability to conduct major operations by choice while fully maintaining the protection of its

territory, citizens, and defense commitments. But no dramatic shift in French strategic thinking, away from a policy of interventionism, is in the cards.

U.S. assistance to French operations is valuable but not critical. U.S. help was important to ensure success in Libya and Mali, in particular for intelligence and air refueling, but these operations would have taken place even without Washington's assistance. They simply would have taken longer and been more risky.

France will be able to count, most of the time, on the United Kingdom. The two countries are strategic twins. They are both permanent members of the UNSC and nuclear weapons states in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). They maintain significant power projection capabilities and have set up joint expeditionary units that benefit from common commitments for over two decades (since their presence on the ground in the former Yugoslav Republics in 1992).

Paris has tried to develop a partner in Berlin, but it needs to face the fact that its strategy of encouraging the transformation and normalization of German defense policy has not fully succeeded. The French–German defense partnership has been an industrial success story, as shown by the European Aeronautic and Space Defense Company (EADS), but concrete and operational military cooperation has been much more efficient with the UK. Perhaps this will change over time, but at the moment (setting aside the United States) only Paris and London have both the capability and the will to act as global military powers, most of the time together as seen in Libya and Syria. Partnering with London also guarantees that French initiatives will not be seen as directed against the United States.

Even on its own, France retains significant capabilities. As in other Western countries, the share of GDP devoted to defense has gradually declined over the past fifty years. From 1.56 percent in 2012 (without pensions), it is expected to decline further. In real terms, however, the defense budget declined during the 1990s, but then rose again to erase about half of this decline. In fact, at slightly more than €30 billion in recent years, the defense budget is nearly what it was in real terms 30 years ago, though the professionalization process and the skyrocketing cost of defense equipment have led to a reduction in the size of French military capabilities.²⁸ Despite the financial crisis, Paris has spent about €1 billion a year on interventions since 2008, most of which was taken from the base defense budget. This means France will remain able to engage in medium-sized operations such as Libya and Mali for the foreseeable future. Of course, Paris, like its Western partners, will be reluctant to engage in new long, heavy, and expensive peace support commitments. But the new defense model will maintain a yearly reserve of about €400 million for “non-exceptional” operations.²⁹

Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault is probably right when he claims that “France will still be able to do in five years what it is doing now in Mali,”³⁰ especially since the new defense model seeks to remedy some of the main French shortcomings (modernization of transport aircraft and drone procurement in particular). But French expert Etienne de Durand is also right to claim that Paris “simply lacks the money and troop numbers for a prolonged counterinsurgency campaign and occupation” (assuming there is still any appetite in Paris for such

operations).³¹ There is a silver lining for medium-sized powers: as François Heisbourg has noted, “affordability will mercifully temper any temptation to go down a road that leads to public disaffection and strategic failure.”³²

There are also upsides about going alone if necessary. For one thing, reactivity is faster than if coalition-building is a prerequisite, and neither force coordination nor rules of engagement have to be negotiated. In fact, the French military claim that recapturing northern Mali would have taken more time if it had involved partners on the ground.

Despite the dire economic and social situation, the French population continues to support the country’s defense policy. Several weeks after the

beginning of Serval, a majority of the French supported the operation, as well as other ongoing operations (except Afghanistan).³³ The annual Bastille Day military parade is a favorite public celebration; public expense on defense remains popular.³⁴ The French have no more tolerance for casualties than Americans, but they have no problem in supporting what they see as just causes. And the French political system leaves a

great deal of latitude to the president in foreign and defense policy, with few checks and balances.

France’s ability to remain a global power despite its economic situation also rests on its structural advantages. As already mentioned, the country is one of five which are both permanent members of the UNSC and a nuclear weapons state in the NPT. The number of French speakers is rising. France’s culture and arts remain admired, its success in high-tech research and development is noteworthy, it is still a leading economic power (fifth in GDP and exports), and some of its industries are among world leaders (fourth by number of firms in the Fortune 500 index). That makes it one of ten to twelve countries that can claim to be major powers. It has expanded its strategic partnerships, for instance with Gulf countries since the early 1990s in particular with the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, and with two key emerging powers, India and Brazil, since the beginning of the century.

Moreover, France also has assets that only Washington and London can claim: a worldwide presence resting on overseas possessions (allowing it to claim the second-ranking maritime domain); nine permanent military bases outside Europe; a vast diplomatic network; and military experience and knowledge covering all major areas of warfare. And, arguably, France is still at the strategic crossroads of Europe: the German–French partnership remains indispensable for EU economic policy orientations, and the UK–French partnership is critical for European security policy decisions.

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In the end, France has a budgetary and financial situation that will slow down the modernization of, and increase the strains on, its armed forces. This will enhance its readiness to pool and share resources with some of its European partners, first and foremost with the United Kingdom. (How much Washington will be ready to lead or assist European operations may alter the calculations of French policymakers.) Nevertheless, Paris will retain the ability and willingness to act on its own if needed.

A broader lesson from French interventionism is: beware of mistaken perceptions of weakness. Modern Western countries are often seen as feeble and casualty-adverse, especially in times of economic crisis and war fatigue, or when they refrain from supporting some of their traditional clients. (Paris is convinced that its refusal to respond positively to the Central African Republic's request for support against a rebellion in early 2013 was perceived by jihadists as a sign that France would not intervene in Mali.)³⁵ The recent French interventionism is proof to the contrary. Jihadist forces and other potential Western foes such as China, North Korea, or Iran bank on our alleged weakness at their own peril.

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Notes

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