

Philippe Perchoc*

*Institut de sciences politiques Louvain-Europe (ISPOLE),
Université Catholique de Louvain*

Paris, Moscow, and “Europe out of the EU”

Under the presidencies of Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande, the French diplomats were keen to strengthen the partnership between Paris and Moscow as it served French interests on the international stage. In this context, this article demonstrates that Eastern-Central Europe (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus) is of secondary interest for French diplomacy, unless it provides an opportunity to highlight Paris’ role in international affairs. The Georgian war in 2008, the Mistral issue, and the Ukraine crises are several good illustrations of this phenomenon.

Introduction

On the 12th of February 2003, at a press conference following the European Summit, a journalist asked the French President Jacques Chirac about the support of the soon-to-be EU member states for the American military operation in Iraq. The answer was: *En tous cas, ils ne sont pas très bien élevés. Ils auraient mieux fait de se taire*¹. This is the kind of remark that embodies the whole series of misunderstandings between France and the Baltic States over the last 15 years, with France considered an arrogant pro-Russian power, uninterested in Central Europe.

The war in Iraq was an “occasion manquée”, which reinforced this impression, and it seems that the unfolding Ukrainian crisis is another one. This crisis attracted the full attention of European countries from the Northern and Central parts of the continent; Sweden, like Poland, is very active, the Netherlands has been very attentive since the crash of the MH17 plane and Germany tried to play the go-between between Ukraine and Russia. France appears to be relatively absent from the resolution of the conflict at the very moment when the sale of Mistral frigates to Moscow is becoming more and more embarrassing.

* Dr. Philippe Perchoc is a researcher at the Institut de sciences politiques Louvain-Europe (ISPOLE), Université Catholique de Louvain. Address for correspondence: 10 rue de Strasbourg, 92700 Colombes, France, tel.: +32 492840846, e-mail: p.perchoc@gmail.com

¹“In any case, they would have better shut up”

France and the Baltic States seem to be on opposing sides over the last ten years. Even though François Mitterrand was the first western president to visit the recently independent Baltic capitals in 1991, the French government has always been suspected of an excessive Russophile bias. In this regard, even the successful French mediation during the Georgian war of 2008 sometimes appears to Baltic commentators as a failed compromise, as it led to a *de facto* annexation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia.

The current attitude of the French to the Ukrainian crisis is a subject of concern, if not of criticism, in Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius. To understand this paradoxical French absence, one needs to look at the big picture of French foreign policy in both the Sarkozy and Hollande presidencies. French diplomacy is driven by a “global-power-syndrome”, with interests lying mainly in Africa and the Middle East. In the 1960s, Keohane shed light on the status of middle-range powers.² He distinguished between system-determining, system-influencing, system-affecting and system-ineffectual powers. France qualifies as a “system-influencing state, which cannot expect individually to dominate a system but may nevertheless be able significantly to influence its nature through unilateral as well as multilateral actions”. Wang and French note that some middle-range powers behave as such and others try to shape the global system,³ such as France.

In order to retain its position after the Second World War, Paris used European integration as a relay of influence in global affairs⁴, as long as it served its interests. Meanwhile, it also sought the support of other big and middle-range powers, such as Russia. This explains why France appears to be a rather inactive power in “Europe-out-of-Europe”, meaning the region encompassing Central and Eastern Europe before 2004 and Eastern-Central Europe (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus) since then. In the wake of a slow decline of its weight in international affairs,⁵ Paris preferred to use the European Union or Russia as means to foster its influence in Africa and the Middle East.

This paper will focus on the Sarkozy and Hollande presidencies and de-

² Robert O. Keohane, “Lilliputians’ Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics”, *International Organization*, 1969, vol. 23, no. 2, p. 291–211.

³ Hongying Wang and Erik French, “Middle Range Powers in Global Governance,” *Third World Quarterly*, 2013 July, vol. 34, no. 6, p. 985–999.

⁴ Andrew Moravcsik, “Why the European Union Strengthens the State: Domestic Politics and International Cooperation,” in *Working Paper Series n.52* (presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, New York: Center for European Studies, Harvard University, 1994); Andrew Moravcsik, *The Choice for Europe: Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maastricht*, Cornell University Press, 1998.

⁵ Frédéric Charillon, “La politique étrangère de la France”, *Études* 402, April 1, 2005, no. 4, p. 449–459.

monstrate that Eastern-Central Europe (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and the Caucasus) is of secondary interest for French diplomacy, unless it provides an opportunity to highlight the efficiency of the French. The Georgian war in 2008, the Mistral issue, and the Ukraine crises are several good illustrations of this phenomenon.

1. Different geostrategic interests: France, Russia and the Baltic States

France and Russia were sometimes opposed on the battlefield, during the Napoleonic wars and the Crimean crisis (1853-1856) for example, but the two countries have been close allies since the end of the 19th century, initially through financial cooperation. In 1888, Paris Bourse offered cheap loans in order to fund Russian industrialization.⁶ Some years later, in 1894, the Russian-French alliance came into force in order to contain Germany, after the refusal of the latter to prorogue the secret Russian-German reinsurance treaty⁷. During the First and the Second World wars, France—or at least the Resistance movements during the German occupation—created a strong bond with Russia, reinforced by the intellectual magisterium of the pro-Soviet French intelligentsia. André Gide (until 1936), Jean Paul Sartre, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Paul Nizan, André Breton, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Edgar Morin until the 1950s have all been “compagnons de route du Parti Communiste”. Even after they broke with Moscow, they remained close to the Soviet Union, at least through anti-Americanism. For example, even if Jean-Paul Sartre decided to visit Lithuania, then part of the USSR, and Moscow in 1965, he never questioned the occupation of Lithuania by the USSR. Of course, some intellectuals, Raymond Aron among them, opposed this tendency, but they remained somewhat marginalised. A common phrase at that time was “better wrong with Sartre than right with Aron”.

During the Cold War, the “philosovietism” of French diplomacy⁸ was combined with a difficult partnership with NATO, as Paris left the NATO integrated military command structure in 1966. This balanced French policy was a way for Paris, along with its autonomous nuclear capacity since 1964, to play

⁶ George Frost Kennan, *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War*, Manchester University Press, 1984.

⁷ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, London: Harper, 2013.

⁸ Marie-Pierre Rey, *La Tentation du rapprochement: France et URSS à l'heure de la détente (1964-1974)*, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1991.

its card as a global player, despite its position in the Western diplomatic system.⁹ The semi-autonomy of France was also reinforced by its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council¹⁰. The multipolar orientation of French diplomacy can also rest on the fact that it has the third largest diplomatic network in the world (163 embassies, 16 permanent representations).

These are the elements of relatively independent French diplomacy in the aftermath of the Second World War. This position on the edge of the Western alliance reinforced the status of France as a middle-range power with global ambitions. Paris used this status in its relationships with its former colonies in Africa in particular. After the independence of these countries, and until recently, the former francophone African elite had deep ties to the French economic and political spheres, a relationship called “françafrique”. France maintained permanent military bases in Africa and protected some of its leaders¹¹.

Alongside this African policy, European integration was conceived as a means to enhance France’s status in the world. This was the case with the conception of the European project and the Europe Coal and Steel Community, and becomes apparent when one considers that the setting of the European Economic Community in 1957 follows the debacle of the Suez intervention in 1956¹². The concept was clear in the “Schuman declaration” on the 9th of May, 1950, which stated that the European integration would be beneficial for Africa.

Being powerfully anchored in the Western camp through NATO, and using its leading position in the various European communities (ECSC and EEC), France used its regional position to foster its international ambitions before and after the Cold War. Since the 1990s, Paris advocated for a common European security and defence policy. Consequently, Paris drew the interest of London to its project in Saint Malo in 1998,¹³ as the two countries have the biggest defence budgets in Europe. France and the United Kingdom have been the only significant military players in the EU, but in the long run, the French preference for a European defence policy was unsuccessful, as most European countries prefer to rely on NATO.

⁹ Frédéric Bozo, *La Politique Étrangère de La France Depuis 1945*, Paris: Flammarion, 2012.

¹⁰ Philip H. Gordon, *A Certain Idea of France. French Security Policy and the Gaullist Legacy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

¹¹ Tony Chafer, “Chirac and ‘la Françafrique’: No Longer a Family Affair”, *Modern & Contemporary France* 13, no. 1, février 2005, p. 7–23.

¹² Tony Judt, *Postwar: a History of Europe since 1945*, London: Vintage Books, 2010.

¹³ Alice Pannier, Olivier Schmitt, “Institutionalised Cooperation and Policy Convergence in European Defence: Lessons from the Relations between France, Germany and the UK”, *European Security*, vol. 23, no. 3, February 2014, p. 270–89.

Paris tried to enroll other EU countries to foster its ambitions in the Middle East and in Africa, as it was not convincing enough to attract small powers. Paris is traditionally present on the African continent. As of February 2014, its permanent bases comprise¹⁴:

Table 1. French military presence in in the Middle East and in Africa

Country	Number of troops
Senegal	250-350
Mali	1000 (2500 for the operation against jihadists)
Niger	200
Chad	950 (1400 for the operation against jihadists)
Djibouti	1400
Gabon	900
Gulf of Guinea	750 (marine)
Burkina Faso	200

However, France also tried to convince other European countries to participate in targeted ground or aerial operations against jihadist forces in the region (Chad, Mali), against crimes against humanity (Libya) and for peace-keeping missions (Ivory Coast). All of these interventions are under the auspices of the UN, the EU and NATO, but sometimes, like in Mali, France is the only significant EU contributor to the operation. Still, this is a good illustration of how France is trying to foster its international status as a system-influencing state using the European Union and other international bodies. France tries to use its regional basis to influence the international system.

The Russian case since the fall of the USSR is an illustration of another tendency: to use its international status to focus on regional issues.¹⁵ In 1990, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence struggled to define a new status for the Russian Federation¹⁶: as a global player with the support of the USA, but without a regional basis contested by the NATO and EU enlargements, and as a regional player with a global ambition. The failure of the attempt to be recognised as a legitimate international player¹⁷ as well as

¹⁴ Sources: Ministry of Defence, RFI.

¹⁵ Robert H. Donaldson, Joseph L. Noguee, Vidya Nadkarni, *The Foreign Policy of Russia: Changing Systems, Enduring Interests*, M.E. Sharpe, 2014.

¹⁶ Evgenij Primakov, *Russian crossroads : toward the new millennium*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004; Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, New York: Random House, 2002; Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

¹⁷ Iver B. Neumann, "Russia as a Great Power, 1815–2007", *Journal of International Relations and Development* 11, no. 2, 2008, p. 128–151.

the internal struggles led Moscow to use its international status to foster its regional ambitions. This first became clear in the eruption of the so-called frozen conflicts (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria). In all cases, the Russian army operated as a player that first and foremost acted in the interest of Russia. The exploitation of these conflicts¹⁸ provides a good illustration of that: Russia blocked any international and UN interventions, using its status on the global stage. After 1991, Russia was no longer a system-determining country and became a system-influencer power. Like France, Russia fights to consolidate this position as much as possible, using all possible means. The latest international crises clearly illustrated this idea: in Syria, the Russians used their veto right at the Security Council to block French attempts to justify an international military intervention. In this case again, France needed Russia to adopt a global leadership position, as it did in Libya with consent from Russia.

This is certainly why France never challenged Russian pre-eminence in the Europe-out-of-the-EU. The lack of interest of Paris in the region is even palpable in the organization of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs: it has a “European Union” directorate and another called “Political Affairs and Security” of which “Continental Europe” is a sub-directorate, and includes “Russia and Oriental Europe” in the same portfolio.

During the 1990s, Paris appeared to be an uninterested player in Central Europe, limiting itself to initiatives related to minority issues through the OSCE¹⁹. It is significant that Paris is not a main signatory of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances²⁰ together with Russia, the USA, and the UK. France signed a separate document speaking about “security assurances” (“assurances de sécurité”) rather than security guarantees. This was also apparent during the negotiations for the enlargement of NATO and the EU in the region: Paris was never in favor of a rapid enlargement²¹, and was always very attentive to Russian concerns over this policy. France tried to make sure that its interests would be safeguarded only when both enlargements were agreed upon. This explains Chirac’s reaction to the Central European support of the USA for the intervention in Iraq.

¹⁸ Xavier Follébouckt, *Les Conflits Gelés de L’espace Postsoviétique*, Louvain-la-Neuve: Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2012; Ronald Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

¹⁹ Edouard Balladur, *Le pouvoir ne se partage pas: Conversations avec François Mitterrand*, Paris: Fayard, 2009.

²⁰ This treaty, signed in 1994, involves the moving of the Ukrainian Nuclear Weapons inherited from the USSR,

²¹ Talbott, *The Russia Hand*; Asmus, *Opening NATO’s Door*; Gilles Andréani, “La France et l’OTAN Après La Guerre Froide,” *Politique Étrangère* 63, no. 1, 1998, p. 77–92.

The Baltic perception of French politics in the region is rooted in the idea that Paris remains one of the most Russophile players in the European Union. In addition to France's skeptical attitude to an enlargement of NATO to include the Baltic States²², Chirac's opposition to the American intervention in Iraq in 2003 was also perceived as a cynical deal between France, Germany and Russia.

From the Baltic point of view, regional issues dominate the agenda²³. At the beginning of the 1990s, hard security issues were the primary focus of Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, including the departure of Russian troops (from Lithuania in 1993, from the two other countries in 1994) and issues about borders and Russian minorities in the case of Estonian and Latvian. Since their accession to the EU, they focused both on hard (such as their airspace protection by other NATO members) and soft security issues like cybersecurity, societal security and energy security²⁴. In the vein of France, but with less means, they tried to influence European and Euro-Atlantic policies, to their benefit. But since 2008, the Georgian-Russian war²⁵ and the recent developments in the Ukrainian crisis, hard security problems have returned to the top of the agenda in Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius, and the French attitude towards Russia became a grave concern.

On the one hand, it appears that France and Russia are fighting to keep their positions as middle-range powers, but with different strategies. Paris focuses on the EU and sometimes NATO to enhance its margin of manoeuvre when acting in Africa and in the Middle-East. Therefore, Paris remains relatively uninterested in the region between the EU and Russia, and avoids contesting Russia's preeminence in this region in order to get Russian support for operations in Paris' own regions of interest. On the other hand, Russia is keen to block international institutions in order to safeguard its influence in

²² Matthieu Chillaud, *Les Pays baltes en quête de sécurité*, Paris: Economica, 2009; Philippe Perchoc, *Les États Baltes et Le Système Européen (1985-2004)*, Bruxelles: Peter Lang, 2014.

²³ Graeme P. Herd, Joan Löfgren, "Societal Security", *The Baltic States and EU Integration*, *Cooperation and Conflict* 36, no. 3, 2001, p. 273–296; Maria Mälksoo, "From Existential Politics Towards Normal Politics? The Baltic States in the Enlarged Europe", *Security Dialogue* 37, no. 3 (2006): 275; Maria Mälksoo, *The politics of becoming European: a study of Polish and Baltic post-Cold war security imaginaries*, London; New York: Routledge, 2010.

²⁴ Žygmantas Vaičiūnas, "Lithuanian Energy Security under Review: New Energy Developments after the Closure of Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant", *Diplomaatia*, April 2010, nr. 80, <http://www.diplomaatia.ee/en/article/lithuanian-energy-security-under-review-new-energy-developments-after-the-closure-of-ignalina-nucle/>; Valentina Pop, "Estonia Training Nato 'Techies' for Cyberwar", *Euobserver*, June 14, 2011, <http://euobserver.com/1018/32479>; Philippe Perchoc, "Les États Baltes, Entre Défense Territoriale Et Élargissement Des Concepts De Sécurité", *Revue D'études Comparatives Est-Ouest* 44, no. 03, December 2, 2013, p. 61–88.

²⁵ Asmus, *A Little War That Shook the World*.

the former Soviet region, excluding the Baltic States, which are EU/NATO members. The latter are mainly concerned with their immediate neighbours and the attempt to influence the EU and NATO to ensure a maximal presence in this Europe-out-of-the-EU region.

The analysis of the Georgian war in 2008 and the Mistral and Ukrainian cases will provide illustrations of the French attitude toward Russia and Eastern Europe.

2. The Georgian War

During the presidential electoral campaign of 2007, Nicolas Sarkozy was perceived as a pro-American, pro-human rights candidate. This was unusual in France, traditionally a US-sceptic country. He declared that “our silence about the 200 000 dead people and the 400 000 refugees of the war in Chechnya is not possible anymore” and that “it’s not because China and Russia are big powers that we should refrain from condemning the violations of Human Rights perpetrated there.”²⁶ He also proposed that France should re-establish the integrated NATO military command structure after 40 years of independence.

Once in power, he developed a different view on the French-Russian relationship. He discovered that the French diplomatic staff was very Russophile, including his main adviser, Jean-David Levitte, a Sinophone with a Russian family. The latter was also the Sherpa of Jacques Chirac, a far more Russophile President, which ensured the continuity of French diplomacy, beyond the Sarkozyian rhetoric of “rupture”. But, for the first months of his presidency, Russia was not at the top of the agenda.

One of the priorities was the launching of the Union for the Mediterranean. Sarkozy promoted this project during his presidential campaign a year before. At first, it was supposed to include countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea only, but this triggered opposition from other EU countries, like Germany. It was eventually decided that it would include all EU countries and the countries of the Barcelona process. On the 13th of July 2008, the eve of the National Day, all the partners were invited to Paris. France held the Presidency of the European Union. Even Libya sent its Minister for foreign affairs and the Syrian President, Assad, participated in the event²⁷ and was an honorary

²⁶ Nouvel Obs, “Quand Le Candidat Sarkozy S’exprimait Sur Les Droits de l’Homme En Russie,” *Nouvelobs.com*, accessed September 12, 2014, <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/monde/20071203.OBS8127/quand-le-candidat-sarkozy-s-exprimait-sur-les-droits-de-l-homme-en-russie.html>.

²⁷ France at that time wanted to break the Syrian isolation.

guest at the July 14th celebrations. French diplomacy was entirely devoted to the achievement of the Mediterranean project.

Paris received a warning on the eve of the attack in Georgia in August²⁸. Both President Sarkozy and Kouchner, the Minister for foreign affairs were on vacation. It appeared that France would have to intervene, not only because it had good relations with the Russians, but also because both the EU and Paris would have been criticized for not doing so. During the crisis, Sarkozy directly negotiated with Medvedev, whom he presented as a more “Euro-compatible” partner than Putin. After that, he defended a more “realist” diplomatic stance toward Russia and played down his criticism of human rights issues. And at different periods during his tenure as President, he made agreements with Russia. French activism, which resulted in a ceasefire, was an illustration of the way France perceives its role in the EU: taking credit for possible EU successes. But the presentation of the role of France in the ceasefire has been criticized. Russian troops were already deep into the Georgian territory and unwilling to engage a battle in Tbilisi. The French intervention largely permitted the Russians to transform their military gains into political gains. The agreement does not insist on the territorial integrity of Georgia and is a *de facto* acceptance of the annexation of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia. Nevertheless, the operation was presented as a great success for the EU, for France and for the French Presidency. France should be credited for its capacity to drive weak European diplomatic capabilities forward. Until the end of France’s EU presidency, Sarkozy was involved in the South Caucasus, but since then, Paris moved back to its traditional position as an uninterested actor in the region and occupied itself with the Union of the Mediterranean.

The war in Georgia shows that France is willing to use the EU as leverage and involve itself in a second-interest region only if it can sustain Paris’ position as a system-influencing power.

3. The Mistral Case

The selling of the French ‘Mistral’ warships to Russia was, even before the beginning of the Ukrainian crisis, a subject of criticism in Poland, Georgia and the Baltic States. It embodied the ambiguous position of France in the Atlantic alliance, as Russia is buying military technology abroad for the first time since 1945, and from a NATO country. Several reasons can explain the

²⁸ Interview with a French diplomat, Ministry for foreign affairs, November 2008

willingness of the Sarkozy government to sell these ships, from both political and economic perspectives.

Nicolas Sarkozy discovered that his personal objectives in international affairs needed support outside the European Union and NATO. In 2009, he wanted to make the Copenhagen Summit on climate change a success. In this regard, Russian participation was key to finding an agreement and was directly negotiated between Sarkozy and Medvedev. The Russian President eventually left Copenhagen before the agreement, but did not block it. A part of this deal was the sale of the former site of Meteo France, next to the Eiffel tower, in order to build the new Russian orthodox church of Paris. Ultimately, Sarkozy preferred the Russian offer to the Saudi one. The project comprises a church, a school and a cultural centre. And it has been at the very core of the French-Russian meetings since 2010. Even the Paris' city council, ruled by the Socialist party, accepted the project.

The following year, in the same vein, the French presidency also needed a constructive Russian attitude concerning its plan to intervene in Libya with the British. At the time, Sarkozy needed the approval of the UN Security Council, or at least the abstention of Russia and China. In the end, Russia abstained, even if this move was criticized by part of the Russian elite.

In view of a prolonged and renewed partnership between Paris and Moscow, the Russian government's proposal to buy French warships appeared to be an opportunity to strengthen the link between the two capitals. It also helped to promote a positive image of Medvedev in France.

This sale should be taken as part of a wider economic partnership between the two countries, encouraged by large French firms²⁹. French and Russian companies concluded new alliances during Sarkozy's presidency. Alstom bought part of Transmashholding, a key player in the Russian train sector; EDF, the French main electrical company, collaborated with Gazprom on the South Stream project, a gas link under the Black Sea, and GDF, the main gas company found an agreement with Gazprom for the North Stream project, under the Baltic Sea, a project hugely criticized by the Baltic States. In other strategic sectors, the Russian space agency decided to launch Soyouz from the Kourou base in French Guyana, and the selling of 'Mistral' ships was negotiated between Paris and Moscow.

The ship is often described as a "Swiss army knife"³⁰ because of its highly versatile capabilities (command a float, land forces, hospital, helicopters). It

²⁹ Arnaud Dubien, "Nicolas Sarkozy et la Russie, ou le triomphe de la Realpolitik", *Revue internationale et stratégique* 77, no. 1, April 6, 2010, p. 129–131.

³⁰ Matthieu Chillaud and Arnaud Kalika, "Alliance Solidarity versus 'Business as Usual': The Sale of French Warships to Russia," *Estonian Foreign Policy Yearbook*, 2010, 83–100.

is compatible with NATO materials, but it functions as a support rather than an attack ship. On the Russian side, two reasons triggered the idea of buying the first foreign-made warships since 1945: to purchase two fully operational ships that will save time and money at a time when Russian naval strategy is undergoing rapid changes, and to acquire the know-how that will facilitate the development of the Russian navy-industry in a new direction.

The latter objective remains a problem: a technological transfer of this significance to a non-NATO country raised concerns not only in Poland and the Baltic States, but also in the USA. Nevertheless, the agreement was signed, following pressure from big French companies like DCNS and Thales, and in light of economic difficulties in the Saint-Nazaire region where the first two ships would be built.

The fact that François Hollande's first Prime Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, was the mayor of the biggest city in the region, Nantes, is a reason that he continued to support the project after 2012. In fact, very little changed after Hollande's election in May 2012. The Socialist candidate kept a very low profile on international affairs during the campaign, mainly playing on anti-Sarkozysm. His only significant promise was to "reorient Europe". Once the Socialist government came to power, François Hollande was surrounded by realists in the field of international relations, with Laurent Fabius as Minister for foreign affairs. One of the first problems that the Presidency faced was the crisis in Syria. At first, the French were in favor of a strong intervention. They even proposed joint strikes with the US against Assad after the use of chemical weapons. The Americans finally preferred to strike a deal directly with the Russians for the removal of these weapons, leaving France out in the cold. This episode shows that the position of France as a system-influencing power is sustainable only when in alliance with the USA and without veto from Russia. True, Paris would have preferred Moscow not to veto its proposal of an intervention in Syria in 2013, but the French-Russian partnership remains strong. Even when disagreements occur, for example regarding Syria, business links remain at the core of the French-Russian relationship. During his visit to Moscow in May 2014, the French President promoted French "savoir-faire" and was accompanied by fifteen CEOs from big French industries. The Mistral deal was never called into question, and the continuity of the Sarkozy and Hollande presidencies is evident in this field.

4. The French's Uneasy Reaction to the Ukrainian Crisis

Similar to other European countries like Poland in the east, France tries to mobilize European action in regions that are key for Paris through the Eastern Partnership³¹. In addition to the necessary cooperation from Russia to fulfill these interests and to strengthen the industrial links between Paris and Moscow, this explains the low degree of involvement of Paris in the Ukrainian crisis.

When Russia annexed Crimea, France was mobilized by the Israeli intervention in the Gaza strip. The issue was very sensitive, as Paris has always had a balanced view on the Palestinian conflict, and because the war had a profound impact on the former French immigrants. Since the second year of his tenure as President, François Hollande's popularity has been lower than any other French president before him, around 15%. The government was also struggling with internal disputes among ministers about taxes and the level of support to give to the business sector. The authority of the executive seemed to be in question and some members of the opposition even discussed the possibility of early elections at the Assembly or a new presidential election.

Big rallies took place in Paris, sometimes with outbursts of violence and confrontations with the police. Some of them, although illegal, took place anyway and the level of dissent was risky. In addition, journalists and the opposition criticized the government for its poor results in the Syrian crisis, where the only outcome of the temerarious proposal of Paris to bomb the regime was the removal of chemical weapons. Until the war in Gaza calmed down, the attention of the media and politicians in France was fully focused on this issue. The Ukrainian crises remained largely out of scope.

In May, halting the sale of Mistral was still out of the question. Even if the NATO allies, including the United States, put some subtle pressure on the French Presidency and Ministry of Foreign affairs, only the aggravation of the situation in the field at the end of August prompted the French government to provisionally suspend the agreement. In any case, Paris was against any sanctions from the EU that would prevent the sale in the future, provided that the situation does not deteriorate further. In fact, the position of the French government in this affair is precarious: the deal was signed during the Sarkozy-Medvedev honeymoon, and it involves thousands of jobs in the western part of France. In addition, Paris is trying to equalize its trade balance and the selling

³¹ Laure Delcour, "The Institutional Functioning of the Eastern Partnership: An Early Assessment," *Eastern Partnership Review*, no. 1, 2011.

of the warships would be very welcome in support of that attempt. The final reason that explains François Hollande's ambiguous position is the fear of that it could send the wrong signal to other potential clients, especially for warplanes like the Rafale. Brazil and India are both interested in this cutting-edge plane, and France has not succeeded in selling it abroad yet. In this matter the typical position of France as a middle-range independent country is an asset, as these countries do not want to rely only on American technology.

The decision to stop the sale, and not to cancel, was severely criticized by both radical left and radical right parties. The radical left leader, Jean Luc Mélenchon, allied to the Communist party for elections, called the decision "treachery"³². He defended the Russian position on Ukraine, stating in Grenoble 'not to support a government including Nazi people.'³³ In March he declared that 'the Russian nation cannot admit NATO at its door.'³⁴

For other reasons, Marine Le Pen, the President of the Front National, a radical right populist party, defended an uneasy position, but on the whole supported the Kremlin and condemned the sanctions against Moscow. One has to say that the Front National seems to have deep connections with the Kremlin. Many of its top leaders have been invited to Moscow, and they respect the strong and conservative regime of Vladimir Putin.

Conclusion

In conclusion, France's strategy does not vary a lot from one President to the other. The diplomatic, military, and business elites continue to see Moscow as a potential ally, or at least a power that will not impede French action in Africa and the Mediterranean Sea region. This issue remains of the utmost importance, as Paris wants to foster its status as an independent Western power, one that can strongly influence the international agenda. Due to the fact that it has limited resources, the French government prefers to invest in some priority regions and be less involved in others, including Europe-outside-the-

³² Jean-Luc Mélenchon, "Navires Mistral : François Hollande Commet Une Trahison Insupportable", Blog de Jean-Luc Melenchon, accessed September 12, 2014, <http://www.jean-luc-melenchon.fr/2014/09/03/navires-mistral-francois-hollande-commet-une-trahison-insupportable/>.

³³ Jean-Luc Mélenchon, *Discours de J.L.Mélenchon, À Grenoble, Le 24 Août*, Grenoble, 2014, <http://www.lepartidegauche.fr/laradiodegauche/intervention/remue-meninges-2014-discours-j-melenchon-grenoble-le-24-aout-29561>.

³⁴ Nouvel Obs, "Ukraine. De Mélenchon À Le Pen, Qu'en Disent Les Politiques Français ?", *Nouvelobs.com* <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/ukraine-la-revolte/20140304.OBS8508/ukraine-de-melenchon-a-le-pen-qu-en-disent-les-politiques-francais.html>, 14-09-2014.

EU, i.e. the region lying between the EU and Russia.

To strengthen its position, Paris uses the European Union whenever it can to help with this strategy, as it did in Georgia in 2008. But apart from the prestige granted by this action as president of the EU, Paris's involvement in the subsequent period remained low. It is clear that Sarkozy and Hollande's strategies maintain an uneasy balance between EU/NATO solidarity and Russian partnership, because this "in between" position is the key to France's influence. Therefore, Hollande's embarrassment following the Mistral and Ukrainian affairs is easily understandable: Paris reluctantly is choosing EU/NATO allies over its partnership with Moscow, something that can impede its ambitions in the Middle-East or Africa, as Russia will not be so cooperative at the UN Security Council.

As a member of two strong alliances and a system-influencing power, France's dilemma is always complicated: Paris needs to secure its position in these alliances, while at the same time continuing to act independently without undermining the alliances. Regarding this problem, it seems that Nicolas Sarkozy and François Hollande offer the same answer.

September 2014