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**THE FOREIGN POLICY OF
PRESIDENT HOLLANDE:

U-TURN OR CONTINUITY?**

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Abstract

What kind of foreign policy will François Hollande, the new French President, conduct? The author analyzes the different options and compares these with the policies of his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. He concludes that there will be continuity, but also changes. Although continuity will prevail in the EU and in the transatlantic relationship, changes can be expected in the relationship with Turkey, China, Japan, Russia, Francophone Africa, and, possibly, in the Middle East.

Hollande's Foreign Policy: A Black Box?

On 15 May 2012 François Hollande became the new French president. After the hyperactive presidency of Nicholas Sarkozy Hollande promised to be a 'normal president'. However, what a 'normal president' is supposed to be remains unknown. We may therefore assume that Hollande only wanted to stress his difference with Sarkozy, sensing that presenting himself as the 'anti-Sarkozy' could bring him a majority in the country. Does Hollande's self-presentation as the 'anti-Sarkozy' also imply a U-turn in French foreign policy and will he steer France into a totally new direction which will have a direct impact on France's relation with the US and NATO? In order to answer this question we have to take into account the following elements:

1. Hollande is not a foreign policy expert.
2. Foreign policy did also hardly figure in his election program, nor in the election campaign.
3. There is no clear right-left divide in French foreign policy. However, there is another divide: Gaullist-Mitterrandist versus Atlanticist. The foreign policy of Gaullists can be Atlanticist and the foreign policy of Socialists can be Gaullist.
4. In addition, the foreign policy conducted by one and the same president, can show great variations during his tenure. This was the case during the presidency of Hollande's predecessor.

How do these four elements impact on the foreign policy choices of the new French president?

Hollande is not a Foreign Policy Expert

Hollande is not a foreign policy expert. The man, who was during eleven years first secretary of the Socialist Party, has certainly a fine knowledge of many dossiers, including those concerning economic governance, public administration, and finance. He has also outspoken ideas on the reform of education, pensions, and the welfare system. However, he has less often expressed himself on international affairs and even less made himself a name by formulating original ideas about the place of France in the world. This lack of international experience is in itself not a reason why Hollande could not conduct a sensible foreign policy. Also Nicolas Sarkozy, who was an interior minister before becoming president, had no foreign policy experience, and the same is true of Barack Obama, whose international experience before becoming president was restricted to a short membership of the Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee. In these cases much depends on the choice of good advisers and capable foreign ministers, as well as the ability of the new president to learn in office. Obama did not hesitate to appoint the experienced Hillary Clinton as foreign secretary. Sarkozy made another choice and appointed Bernard Kouchner, the co-founder of Doctors Without Borders, a medical NGO, as foreign minister. Kouchner was, like Sarkozy himself, a novice in international affairs, which had a negative impact on Sarkozy's foreign policy. The appointment by Hollande of Laurent Fabius as foreign minister, on the contrary, augurs well. Fabius, a former prime minister, has the experience and stature to lead the *Quai d'Orsay*. The only flaw is his opposition to the European Constitution in 2004, but his support for the no vote was less a principled stance than a (failed) tactical maneuver to become the Socialist presidential candidate, and will therefore not prevent him from conducting a genuine pro-European policy.

Foreign Policy was Almost Absent in the Election Campaign

A second element which increases the uncertainty concerning Hollande's foreign policy is the fact that foreign policy was attributed only a minor place in the *60 engagements for France*, listed in the 41 page election program *Le changement c'est maintenant* (Change is now). One can find there, for instance, a plea for the enlargement of the Security Council, a

proposal which, in fact, is not so new. Sarkozy already promised the same in 2006 in his book *Témoignage*, where he wrote: “I am convinced that one can no longer restrict oneself to the actual permanent members.”(1) Hollande’s program also mentions the countries South of the Mediterranean with which he wants to establish a relationship based on an “economic, democratic and cultural project”, but this still remains rather vague and needs further elaboration. Another announced initiative is “to encourage, by new negotiations, peace and security between Israel and Palestine.” It is not yet clear if Hollande really prepares for new overtures or if this promise only represents the obligatory pep talk used by European chancelleries. In fact, the program contains only one concrete point: the promise to withdraw two thousand French combat troops from Afghanistan before the end of 2012, a promise which will make neither the US, nor the other NATO allies especially happy, but which is, in itself, not dramatic. Foreign policy not only occupied a marginal place in the Socialist election program, it was also almost absent in the election campaign. Even in the great TV debate between the two candidates on May 2, 2012, the only references to foreign policy were made in the context of the debt crisis and the euro crisis. The international context was not discussed as such, but rather as a *background* to criticize the economic policies of the adversary.

There is No Right-Left Divide in French Foreign Policy

If François Hollande is a novice in foreign policy, if his election programme does not offer many clues, and if he did not express himself explicitly on foreign policy during the presidential election campaign, what can we expect? For outsiders Hollande remains a foreign policy *black box*. The only fact that could provide a clue is that during the campaign he presented himself as the *anti-Sarkozy*. But does this mean that he will radically change the course of French foreign policy? Not necessarily. Because in France there is no clear right-left divide in foreign policy. When the Socialist François Mitterrand became President in 1981 he continued the foreign policy of his Gaullist and Centrist predecessors. Like De Gaulle he kept France out of the integrated command of NATO, and like Giscard he promoted a pro-European course which led to the Treaty of Maastricht and the Monetary Union. Ironically, it was Nicolas Sarkozy, the leader of the *Gaullist* UMP, who buried the

Gaullist legacy and who, in April 2009 - after an absence of 43 years! - brought France back in the integrated command of NATO. This means that François Hollande, *as a Socialist*, is not bound by any predetermined foreign policy line. He is free to choose to continue Sarkozy's Atlanticist course or to return to the Gaullist-Mitterrandist position which claims for France a special, more independent, and less integrated position in the Alliance. In the Socialist Party there are proponents of such a return to Gaullist basics. One of them is Hubert Védrine, who was Secretary-General of the Élysée under Mitterrand and later foreign minister. Although Védrine has no position in the present government and does not belong to the inner circle of Hollande, the new president has to take into account the opposition that exists in his party against the Atlanticist course. Hollande already announced that in the coming months an evaluation will be made of France's reintegration into NATO. A return to the *status quo ante*, however, seems not to be on Hollande's wish list. In the last three years France has considerably strengthened its position in the alliance. Immediately after its return in 2009 it obtained the command of Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk (USA), one of the two supreme commands of NATO. In the political organization it got a deputy Secretary General, tasked with investments. And when in April 2012 the posts for generals were distributed, France reached for the first time parity with the United Kingdom. In 2012 870 French military personnel work at NATO, against 160 before 2009. The new, prestigious position of France in NATO is highly appreciated by the French military. It is also appreciated by the French armaments industry that since the reintegration of Paris has obtained full access to calls for tender for NATO armaments programs. It is therefore safe to predict that Hollande will not jeopardize these accomplishments.

Sarkozy's Foreign Policy Legacy: An Unequal Balance

A fourth, and last element we have to consider is the *foreign policy legacy* which Hollande receives from his predecessor. A foreign policy legacy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a new administration is eager to show its difference with the preceding one. The foreign policy of a country is, on the other hand, determined by a number of geopolitical, strategic, historical, and economical factors which are, as a rule, characterized by continuity. Changing the foreign policy of a country is, therefore, like changing the course of a

mammoth tanker. Normally, such changes are piecemeal and slow. In addition there is the fact that the foreign policy legacy received by Hollande from his predecessor is very uneven, because the foreign policy conducted by Sarkozy during his tenure showed great variations. We can even speak of a *foreign policy U-turn* during Sarkozy's presidency. When he became president, Sarkozy, a foreign policy *novice* himself, chose Bernard Kouchner, a mediatized ONG personality and a former Socialist health minister(2), as his foreign minister. The results were catastrophic.(3) In December 2007 Sarkozy invited with great pomp the Libyan dictator Kadhafi at the Elysée. Four months later, in April 2008, he visited the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali and declared on his arrival that he had not come to give 'lessons in human rights'. In July of the same year he invited both the Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak and the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad as his special guests of honor to assist at the military parade organized for the *Quatorze Juillet*, France's national holiday. Some weeks later Sarkozy flew to Moscow and Tbilisi to mediate in the war between Russia and Georgia. He negotiated a flawed cease fire agreement that gave the Russian occupying troops the right to remain in Georgia outside Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The fact that Moscow dismembered Georgia some weeks later by declaring the breakaway provinces independent and also did not respect the cease fire agreement did not lead to protests from Paris. On the contrary, it was the start of a shameful French-Russian honeymoon which led to juicy contracts for French firms, with, as an apotheosis, the sale of four ultra-modern Mistral helicopter carriers to Russia, the first great arms contract of this kind by a NATO member. Sarkozy's China policy was equally flawed. After the bloody repression of manifestations in Tibet in March 2008 he threatened China with a boycott of the Olympic Games. However, when the Chinese in response began to boycott French products and tourism to France, Sarkozy quickly changed tone.

In November 2010 Sarkozy sacked Kouchner and appointed a new foreign minister, Michelle Alliot-Marie. But this was hardly an improvement. Alliot-Marie not only accepted air travel and holidays from friends of the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali, but did even offer French support to the Tunisian secret services when the first demonstrations against the regime started. Sarkozy's opportunist and unprincipled foreign policy led to a great malaise among French diplomats. A group of them published under the pseudonym *Marly* an open letter in the paper *Le Monde*, accusing the president and his minister of 'amateurism' and 'impulsivity'.

“Europe is powerless, Africa escapes us, the Mediterranean is dissatisfied with us, China has tamed us, and Washington ignores us,” wrote the authors.(4) Five days later Sarkozy finally changed course. He sacked Alliot-Marie and appointed in her place the experienced Alain Juppé, a former prime minister and foreign minister under Chirac. From then on French foreign policy took a U-turn. The defense of human rights and democracy made a comeback. French troops intervened in Ivory Coast in favor of the legally elected President Ouattara and later Sarkozy took the initiative to support the rebels in Libya which finally led to the downfall of Khadafi. The difference with the preceding period was striking – thanks, not least, to the efforts of Alain Juppé. Never before in the French Fifth Republic one had witnessed such a foreign policy U-turn. If Hollande is distancing himself from his predecessor, it will be especially from the first four years of Sarkozy’s presidency.

What Can We Expect?

So, what can we expect? We can expect *both* continuity and change which we will summarize hereunder.

- *The Relationship with NATO.*

Hollande will not revoke Sarkozy’s – bold – decision to reintegrate France into the military organization of NATO. Although Hollande’s foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, is said to be close to those who share a ‘Gaullist-Mitterrandist’ approach, there will not be a return to the Gaullist ‘special position’ outside the integrated military organization. However, France will continue to defend in NATO its traditional positions. During the NATO summit in Chicago Hollande has already made clear, for instance, that French support for the ballistic missile defense depends on four conditions: that the BMD does not replace deterrence, that the costs remain under control, that the political conditions are clear (who pulls the trigger?), and that French industries can participate in its realization. These four conditions were already formulated by Sarkozy.

- *The Relationship with the US*

Also here there are no great changes to be expected. After Chirac's opposition against the Iraq War, the relationship between France and the US already normalized under Chirac and it improved further under Sarkozy 'the American' (although initially, the personal relationship between Obama and Sarkozy was rather strained). During the visit of Hollande to the White House and to the G8 in May 2012 a cordial relationship could be observed between the French and the US Presidents which augurs well for a future cooperation.

- *The Relationship with Turkey*

Here we can expect a real change. Hollande will not follow Sarkozy in his anti-Turkish stance and apply the principle *pacta sunt servanda*. Turkey was granted candidate status in 1999 and negotiations on the different chapters started in 2005. Due to Sarkozy's opposition (but also due to Turkish unwillingness to open its ports for Greek Cypriot ships) the negotiation process stalled. A more Turkey-friendly policy of France could help unfreeze the situation and prepare Turkey for a compromise on Cyprus. A victory of the German Social-Democrats in the parliamentary elections of autumn 2013 could remove the opposition of the CDU-CSU against Turkish membership and make things move further forward.

- *The EU*

Hollande will – like his predecessor – be fully involved in resolving the debt crisis and the euro crisis. As a more consensual president he could be inclined to stress not only the importance of the bilateral Franco-German axis, but seek also to involve more than his predecessor the smaller EU member states, and stress more the role of the European Commission and the European Parliament.

- *The relationship with China*

Sarkozy was extremely focused on China. There are signs that Hollande wants to put different accents in the French Asia policy. The first comments in the Chinese press on the new French government were critical. The Shanghai paper *Wen Hui Bao*, for

instance, wrote on 10 May, 2012, that Hollande never visited the country which “proves that his lack of interest does not date from yesterday.” The paper also detected politicians around him who had “a ferocious ‘anti-Chinese’ ideology”.(5) One of these was Arnaud Montebourg, who attacked during the campaign the undervaluation of the Chinese yuan and the plant relocations by French firms to China. Also the first contacts between the *équipe Hollande* and the Chinese government did not provide smooth riding. Laurent Fabius, who, in February, was sent as Hollande’s envoy to China, did not succeed to talk with a member of the leadership. Very dissatisfied, he abridged his visit and left the country. However, these misunderstandings could prove to be only temporary. The good news for China is that Hollande appointed Paul Jean-Ortiz as his diplomatic adviser. Paul Jean-Ortiz is Director Asia at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the top China expert at the *Quai d’Orsay*. He speaks fluently mandarin and has passed a great part of his career in China. He was third secretary at the embassy in Beijing (1987-88), general consul in Canton (1992-93), second secretary in Beijing (1993-95), and – after a stay at the embassy in Hanoi – came back to Beijing as minister counsellor (2000-2005). Although Ortiz will help Hollande to overcome the hurdles in the French-Chinese relationship, one may expect that Hollande, as compared to Sarkozy, will less easily give up human rights concerns for purely commercial interests.

- *Japan*

During his Asia tour Fabius also visited Japan, where he had more success than in China. In Tokyo he met with Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda. Fabius told the press that Sarkozy - who during his presidency visited Japan only once - had neglected the French-Japanese relationship. One may expect, therefore, a more balanced Asia policy of the new French government.

- *The Middle East Peace Process*

There are signs that Hollande wants to play here a more active role than his predecessor. The Middle East Peace Process is explicitly mentioned as a matter of special attention in the Socialist election program. In January 2012 Hollande’s foreign minister-in-waiting Laurent Fabius went to Israel where he met with President

Shimon Peres and defense minister Ehud Barak. He visited also Qatar, and spoke with representatives of the Palestinian Authority. Close to the Socialist Party operates an important pressure group of ex-ambassadors who support the Palestinian cause. In an op-ed in *Le Monde* this group of 15 asked for new French initiatives.(6) A French (or EU) initiative will certainly not come soon. And if it comes, it will be dependent on many factors: the international situation, the internal political situation in Israel, aloofness of the US, and – last but not least: it has to overcome the traditional distrust in Israel of French initiatives.

- *Françafrique*

The relations of France with its former colonies in French speaking Africa were often characterized by corruption affairs. Giscard had his Bokassa affair (diamonds), Mitterrand's son Jean-Christophe was implied in the 'Angola Gate' arms dealing affair. President Hollande, who has promised to bring morality back in French politics, has a chance of becoming, eventually, the first *Mister Clean Hands*.

- *Iran*

Sarkozy took a harder position vis-à-vis the regime in Tehran than Washington, pushing for sanctions. Will Hollande continue the approach of his predecessor? In an op-ed in *Le Monde* the ambassador of Iran in France, Ali Ahani, wrote to hope that France under Hollande would "choose a realist and constructive vision", in order that "the privileged historical relations between France and Iran will be re-established on a level in conformity with the greatness of these two civilizations."(7) Hollande seems closer to Obama's position which favors dialogue and negotiations. The problem will be that the new willingness of Tehran to negotiate with the 5+1 (permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany) is certainly inspired by the mounting international pressure.

- *Russia*

Putin developed with Sarkozy a close relationship as part of his strategy to forge personal relations with the leaders of the bigger EU states, thereby enabling him to circumvent the EU. Sarkozy fell easily under the charm of the Russian leader.

Although his relationship with Putin did not match the personal friendship of Putin with Gerhard Schröder or Silvio Berlusconi, he chose – like them - to let commercial interests prevail over geopolitical interests and respect for democratic standards and human rights. One can expect that Hollande, who started his presidency with the proclamation of a moral code, will not be so easily duped and will maintain a pragmatic relationship with the Kremlin, while at the same time reaching out to the democratic opposition. A sign of such a new approach would be to impose visa sanctions on Russian officials who are responsible for the torture and death of the Russian anti-corruption lawyer Sergey Magnitsky.

NOTES

- (1) Cf. Nicolas Sarkozy, *Témoignage*, XO Éditions, Paris, 2006, p. 268.
- (2) Sarkozy created in his government some posts for politicians from the left. Socialists who accepted these posts, such as Bernard Kouchner and Éric Besson, were treated as traitors by their former colleagues. Alain Minc, who acted as Sarkozy's 'visitor of the evening' (special personal adviser) said that he had suggested Kouchner as foreign minister. Another politician whose name was mentioned for this function was Hubert Védrine, a former Socialist foreign minister. Apparently, also Védrine was tempted to accept a place in Sarkozy's government. (Cf. "Minc: 'La gauche ne peut gagner que par effraction'", *Le Monde*, May 19, 2012).
- (3) For an early evaluation of Sarkozy's foreign policy see my paper "The Foreign Policy of Nicolas Sarkozy: Opportunistic, Not Principled, and Amateurish", *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper*, No. 10/01, February 2010. Available at http://www.cicerofoundation.org/lectures/Marcel_H_Van_Herpen_FOREIGN_POLICY_SARKOZY.pdf
- (4) Groupe Marly, "La voix de la France a disparu dans le monde", *Le Monde*, February 22, 2011.
- (5) Quoted in *Courrier international*, No. 1123, May 10-16, 2012.
- (6) Yves Aubin de La Messuziere, "Le Proche-Orient dans l'impasse – Une initiative française s'impose!", *Le Monde*, May 10, 2012. The op-ed is signed by 15 diplomats. They include former French ambassadors in Amman, Ankara, Bagdad, Beirut, Cairo, Tehran, Tel Aviv, and Tunis.
- (7) Ali Ahani, "Pour que les relations entre la France et l'Oran prennent un nouveau départ," *Le Monde*, May 19, 2012.

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