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### Happy days are here again? France's reintegration into NATO and its impact on relations with the USA

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## Happy days are here again? France's reintegration into NATO and its impact on relations with the USA

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This paper's title, invoking as it does the optimism of Franklin D. Roosevelt's theme song during his 1932 presidential campaign, speaks to a growing expectation that a profound change for the better is in store for the Franco-American relationship. That bilateral relationship has long been billed as one between the world's two 'oldest allies', with the unstated assumption being that because they have been such longstanding 'partners' in international security, they must typically interact in a constructive fashion, advancing in the process not only their own respective national interests but also the interests of the greater community (the 'West') to which they belong. The reality of their interaction since they initially became allies (in 1778) is, of course, quite different, and is best characterised by long periods of strategic ennui disrupted by occasional moments of bliss and just as occasional bouts of vehement animosity. Although alliance dynamics have not been the only, or even the chief, source of upset in the Franco-American security relationship, there is no denying that at times the two states have differed bitterly over matters precisely because they have been allies. The Western alliance, for each state though for different reasons, has served as a symbolic referent of the first order of importance. Therefore, the nature of their involvement with NATO could be said to serve as a shorthand means of assessing the nature of their involvement with each other. If this is so, then France's reintegration into NATO's military side might reasonably be taken as a harbinger of long-term improvement in the quality of the France–US strategic relationship. This seems to be what many analysts believe, at least. It is the aim of this article to examine critically this supposition.

**Keywords:** France; NATO; USA

### **Introduction: allies and identities**

Though the musical number from which this article takes its title predated by three years Franklin D. Roosevelt's first campaign for the presidency of the USA, it is mostly recalled these days as having been the inspirational theme song of the Democratic Party in November 1932.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, for nearly eight decades now, 'Happy Days Are Here Again' has been linked with Democratic presidential campaigns, and the 2008 election of Barack Obama was no exception, even if its felicitic strains sometimes had a hard time getting heard over the repetitive mantra, 'yes we can'. Given the song's association both with Democratic presidential aspirants and with optimism, and in light of the particularly high standing enjoyed by Barack Obama

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among European publics in general and the French one in particular,<sup>2</sup> we could do worse than to bring it into the title of an article being written at a particularly hopeful moment, not just in the lengthy bilateral French–American relationship but also in the shorter, yet frequently tumultuous, saga of France–NATO relations. For the stars of alliance amity do seem to be at least somewhat in alignment these days, not only in part because Barack Obama and not George W. Bush occupies the Oval Office, but also because France, after more than four decades on the outskirts, is making its return to the centre of NATO’s integrated military structure.

Since so much of the rancour in bilateral relations between France and the USA has been said to have resulted from France’s uncertain status as an American security partner, and especially as a NATO ally, it stands to reason that whatever contributes to making France appear to be a more viable ally should, all things being equal, also lead to a strengthening of the bilateral ties between it and the USA. Therefore, many believe that French reintegration with the alliance will lead to a fundamental change in what has been a long-standing pattern of diplomatic discord and general ‘suboptimality’ in the two countries’ bilateral relationship.<sup>3</sup> Logic might support this supposition, on the basis that to the extent their relationship has been so often strained in the years since Charles de Gaulle announced that France would de-link from the integrated command of NATO back in 1966, the strains have been nearly indissociable from the two states’ interaction within the alliance. Thus anything that improves that interaction must, the argument goes, also lead to an improvement in the overall bilateral relationship.

In what follows, I am going to probe this contention, in a bid to put to the test the supposition that happy days are, indeed, here again in the France–US relationship. My argument will proceed in this manner. In the remaining portion of this introduction, I comment upon the issue of whether ‘role’ is simply another way of expressing the notion of ‘identity’ in foreign policy and international relations (IR). Following thereupon will be a discussion of how respective American and French images of the other’s (and their own) alliance role/identity have affected the quality of bilateral relations; this discussion takes place in the article’s second and third parts. Part four, ‘Plus ça change’ takes a closer look at the relationship, doing so over a span of time that long predates the formation of NATO, with the purpose of demonstrating the meaning of suboptimality in the two countries’ dealings with one another. After this conceptual and historical interlude, I switch from description to analysis, theorising in the section ‘What does “strategic culture” have to do with suboptimality?’ the bilateral relationship, by examining it through the prism of ‘strategic culture’. I conclude by offering some reasons for expecting that the current *bonhomie* will prove not to be long-lived.

In recent years, identity has emerged as one of the core concepts in the study of foreign policy and IR. Frequently, it is remarked that a country’s identity (its ‘national identity’) can be fundamentally revealed by a close examination of its foreign policy; by the same token, many profess to believe that if we can manage to decipher a country’s identity, then understanding its foreign policy becomes much easier. It is not a new phenomenon, this business of relating policy to identity and vice versa, but it is safe to say that ever since the demise of bipolarity and the contemporaneous rise of ‘social constructivism’ among the ranks of theorists of IR (Walt 1998), it has become will-nigh impossible for analysts to avoid entering into the debate as to whether interests can be separated from identities. For sure, one should never assume that

identity is an easily understood concept in IR; as with most if not all of the subdiscipline's significant concepts, not excluding interests (Kratochwil 1982), identity is a contested one, and there is absolutely no reason to assume that the debate over its very definition will cease any time soon. And as with the other concepts, the battle lines get drawn over the degree to which identity can be expandable: the restrictionists and abolitionists on one side unite in their insistence that the term has been 'stretched' so much as to become devoid of meaning, or close to it (Gleason 1983, Brubaker and Cooper 2000), while on the other side, protagonists shrug and respond with the query, 'So what else is new?' For their part, the expansionists demand that their adversaries provide them with evidence that *any* important concept has been able to resist being stretched nearly out of shape.

I say all this because I want to preface my inquiry into France's reintegration and its impact on relations between it and the USA by reference to claims made about the two states' relative behaviour in the role of 'ally'. My argument is that role can be one (though hardly the only) means of taking the measure of a country's identity, and to the extent that identity determines interest and interest drives behaviour, we are certainly justified in wondering whether the quality of their bilateral interaction (characterised above as suboptimal) owes much to the respective manner in which French and Americans have understood their foreign policy role as primarily being determined by alliance dynamics.

Not all analysts agree that role and identity can be used interchangeably; Aggestam (2000), for instance, prefers to see the former as but one method of constituting the latter, which means that as far as she is concerned, role is the lesser and identity the greater construct. Neither is the injunction not to conflate the two terms new, or restricted to European countries. As long ago as December 1962, in a speech to the American Historical Association in Chicago, the eminent Canadian diplomatist John W. Holmes despaired of the frequency with which concerns about identity continued to crop up in Canadian foreign policy discussions. In his view, appeals to this abstruse concept, identity, were as troublesome as they were unnecessary, given that Canada's role in world affairs could be fairly accurately understood by the right kind of professional diplomatist, possessed of insight into the opportunities as well as constraints presented to Canada by dint of its relative standing in the international society of states. If only matters could be left to those professionals. Unfortunately, he told his audience, the 'zeal with which a distinct foreign policy was pursued was not related to the constant compulsion Canadians felt to preserve and assert their identity' (quoted in Chapnick 2009, p. 147).

*Pace* Aggestam and Holmes – and numerous others who have ventured into these murky conceptual waters – I am going to use role as simply another way, among many, of making manifest or, if the reader prefers, 'operationalising', the always troubling notion of identity. In this respect, what stands out to those who contemplate France's and America's respective alliance roles is how much the foreign policy identity of either owes to inferences derived from the images the countries have entertained of the other in its capacity as ally, or from the meaning of alliances in general, or from both. In a non-trivial manner, both countries have had a tradition of exalting their so-called 'exceptionalism', and for each, exceptionalism has been regularly related to the role of alliance member over the course of the past six decades.

### American images of France as ‘unreliable’ ally

In the USA, up until the last couple of years, it had become a staple of analytical conviction that France was a problematical ally, and had been so well before de Gaulle’s decision to de-link. From the very inception of the alliance shortly after the Second World War, American officials entertained grave suspicions about the reliability of France. Indeed, for this reason Paris was deliberately excluded from the top-secret talks begun in November 1947 and resumed the following spring – talks between the USA, Britain and Canada that would eventually lead to the formation of NATO in April 1949 (Wiebes and Zeeman 1983, Folly 1988, Mackenzie 2004/2005). And even when Americans let down their guard and got used to the idea that they and France were going to be allies once more, they continued to express anxiety about France’s alliance bona fides, partly though not exclusively due to the continuing popularity during the Fourth Republic of the *Parti communiste français* (PCF), which regularly ranked among the largest and most influential, at times *the* largest, of the country’s political parties (Elgey 1965, pp. 15–17, Tiersky 1974, Lazar 2005).

As we will see further on in this article, despite the mythologising that so regularly attends discussions of them as the two ‘oldest allies’,<sup>4</sup> the USA and France have not had a particularly cordial relationship most of the time. Neither have they been allies for very long, when measured against a span of meaningful bilateral interaction stretching back in time more than three centuries (i.e. even prior to the Americans winning their independence). There was, of course, that initial alliance, of 1778, but this turned out to be a rather temporary arrangement, being formally terminated in 1800 but in reality having begun to wither on the vine as early as the Paris peace talks of 1783. Then there was the even shorter period in 1917 and 1918, when the USA and France were co-belligerents, but at the insistence of Washington not formal allies. And finally, there have been the years since 1949 and NATO’s formation. This does not mean that they have consistently gotten on poorly when they have been ‘un-allied’; to the contrary, some of the warmest moments in their bilateral relationship have come when they were unencumbered by alliance obligations, as for instance at the start of the twentieth century, when a combination of factors brought about a reevaluation of the two countries’ appreciation of each other’s respective geopolitical merits.

That marked improvement in bilateral relations had much to do with the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, and his ambition that America assume an active part in the European and global balance of power, doing so in partnership with Great Britain (Burton 1971, Tilchin 1997). Given the latter country’s *Entente cordiale* of 1904 with France, this meant Washington’s tacit cooperation with Paris as well (Haglund 2007). The improvement can also be attributable to some of the same ‘first-image’ variables (Waltz 1954) in play today, meaning that French elites turned out to be smitten with a young and charismatic American president such as Roosevelt was – a president moreover who made a practice of consulting widely with European diplomats, with none more than France’s ambassador to Washington, Jean Jules Jusserand (Blake 1955, Nouailhat 1979, pp. 82–84). However, just a few years after the First World War, the pattern of bilateral relations would revert to form, as if the melancholy nineteenth century had never ended, and while the onset of the Second World War would see France re-emerge as an important American foreign policy interest, its rapid disappearance from the European theatre of combat occasioned a

radically revised appreciation on the part of Americans of why and how the country should thereafter matter to them.

It would be that assessment that coloured US impressions of France during the first decade of the cold war, when Americans focused on their new ally's weakness, not its potential strengths. Indeed, rather than counting upon France as a major 'provider' of western security, those early years of the alliance had Washington casting Paris in the role of security 'consumer' *par excellence*. The objective became to keep France from going over to the side of the Soviet adversary. Interestingly, during the dozen years it existed (1946–58), the French Fourth Republic had a succession of governments who were quite skilled at exploiting Washington's fear of their collapsing, in the process extracting one concession after another through a phenomenon so aptly dubbed by one European analyst as 'the tyranny of the weak' (Lundestad 1997, p. 162). Indeed, as a new NATO ally, France's special standing in American eyes owed much to the perception that it *was* dangerously weak, and not, as had been the case at the start of the twentieth century, that it was one of the great powers and deserved to be treated accordingly (Géraud 1947).

No one better stated the thesis that the French ally counted precisely because of its enfeeblement than did American political journalist David Schoenbrun, who more than a half-century ago proclaimed France to be *the* Western European country of greatest geopolitical import to the USA, as well as the keystone to the arch of European, and by extension global, security. There was a sound strategic rationale, said Schoenbrun (1957, p. 9), in America's having selected the country to host the headquarters of NATO, 'because geographically, politically and strategically France is the linchpin of any Continental coalition'. For sure, France was 'sick' beyond dispute, but that is what made it so important. Failure to keep it from falling into a totalitarian embrace would signify nothing less than a failure to safeguard America's own political and civil liberties, because combating a Soviet Empire that included France would require the establishment in America of a virtual garrison state for as far into the future as anyone could glimpse. Thus, concluded Schoenbrun (1957, pp. 15–16), 'as France goes, so go the plans and hopes of many other nations, for the case of France is a case of world concern'.

The image of France as weakling, easy to entertain in the early days of the Fourth Republic, gradually got replaced by the mid-1960s, in American eyes, with the image of France as nuisance, the Peck's bad boy of a transatlantic alliance it was determined to sabotage – an alliance, moreover, whose new star pupil during the cold war would become none other than the Federal Republic of Germany, which joined NATO in 1955. Up until the last few years, a near-constant interrogative refrain in alliance circles has been, 'What's the matter with France?' Already by the early 1960s some in the USA were foreseeing the impending 'end' of the alliance (Steel 1964). But even for the majority of NATO watchers, who thought the alliance still had much life left in it (there *did* after all remain a Soviet threat to parry), the burden to be shouldered by France in the common defence continued to be an open question, with the country being variously stylised during ensuing decades as a 'reluctant' (Harrison 1981) and 'troubled' (Furniss 1960) ally, a 'guarded friend' (Cogan 1994) in what had degenerated into a 'cold alliance' (Costigliola 1992).

With the surprise ending of the cold war, the tone of France-as-ally discussions became positively acerbic. To more than a few observers, France appeared to have

gone on a footing of permanent opposition to the USA, as reflected in the assertion of President François Mitterrand that ‘we are at war against America’ (quoted in Melandri and Vaisse 2001, p. 455). In this increasingly poisonous atmosphere, it should have shocked no one that an American secretary of state could in 1992 bluntly put to his French counterpart the extremely undiplomatic question, ‘Is France for us or against us?’ (James Baker to Roland Dumas, quoted in Bölte 1992). Paris, suspect in Washington’s (and several other NATO capitals’) thinking for so many years, now grew even more worrisome, to the point that de Montbrial (1992) would exaggerate only slightly when he concluded in that same year that his country apparently had emerged as America’s new ‘public enemy number one’. Quite so, for to many American policy-makers and even theorists of IR who canvassed the prospects of the west hanging together in the absence of its erstwhile Soviet foe, it was never a difficult task in those pre-9/11 years to see trouble ahead, or to round up the usual suspects among the miscreants and pick out France as their ring leader. And if it might still have been possible to maintain during the 1990s that France and America were on ‘amicable’ terms, it was only in the Pickwickian sense captured so well in the title of one French writer’s book about the ‘world’s worst friends’ (Durandin 1994, Guisnel 1999).

### **France returns the compliment**

So much for American images of France in its role as ally. What can we say of French images of America in this same capacity? The French counterpart to the American gravamen can be summed up in an equally parsimonious way: the Americans have regarded France as a questionable ally (and troublemaker, to boot!), and the French have returned the compliment by seeing the Americans as a domineering ally, no less troublesome to France’s own interests and, presumably, Europe’s as well. Notwithstanding NATO’s obvious merits as a guarantee of their physical security (and the French, despite what is so often said of them, have not been inattentive to this attribute, which is why France never had contemplated invoking Article 13 of NATO’s founding treaty and decamping), the fact remains that the alliance has regularly been suspected as being a vehicle for magnifying America’s ability to secure influence over them and the other allies. Noted one scholar, quite aptly, ‘[c]riticism of American policy, or even the American way of life, did not imply, to the French, a desire to forgo American support’ (Chuter 1996, pp. 262–263).

Therefore, in a manner that sets them apart from most other member-countries of the alliance, the French have regularly regarded the latter with a jaundiced eye, and have cultivated a particular understanding of ‘atlanticism’ that places this concept in a very dark light. In other alliance member-countries, for instance Canada, and possibly still even Germany, atlanticism has tended to be closely and positively associated with the grouping known as the ‘west’, the membership of which vaunts a value-set held to be congruent with and perhaps indistinguishable from the respective national ideals and identities of the member-states, as these get expressed in a generalised preference for entrenching and if possible extending liberal–democratic (i.e. ‘atlanticist’) values (Deudney and Ikenberry 1993/1994). So close has been the fit between the larger community’s value-set with that of the respective member-countries that the western alliance has been said by more than a few observers to constitute the best contemporary example of a ‘transnational

collective identity', with this latter being characterised by 'positive identification with the welfare of another, such that the other is seen as a cognitive extension of the Self rather than as independent' (Wendt 1997, p. 55).

Significantly, within this broad construct, there has been one major outlier, a country that has been resistant to sharing in the transnational collective identity so often subsumed under the atlanticism label. That country has been France (Risse-Kappen 1995, Spirtas 1998/1999). So singular has been France's alliance behaviour that the country has earned for itself the right to be the only wearer of the cloak called 'exceptionalism' within the entire alliance – apart, that is, from the USA. For sure, just as all the animals in Orwell's *Animal Farm* were equal, so too are all NATO member-countries *exceptional* in some sense; yet unlike France and the USA, the others prefer to denote their own distinctiveness in a different manner, as a status best captured by words other than exceptionalism. This does not mean, however, that in the two countries that explicitly, no doubt even proudly, see themselves as being exceptional, there is agreement on the term's meaning; to the contrary, debate continues to rage in both the USA and France over what exactly exceptionalism is supposed to signify (Kammen 1993, Wirth 2000). Importantly for our purposes here, much of that contemporary signification is directly related to the alliance and roles therein: for the USA, what is exceptional is the entitlement to 'leadership', while for France the exception has been located precisely in *opposition* to the claim to leadership.

During the autumn of 2009, for reasons not totally understood but thought nevertheless to be linked to the prospect of electoral gain, the French Government sought to stimulate a nationwide debate over the 'national identity', at the invitation of the minister responsible for immigration, Eric Besson (Wieder 2009, p. 16). It is hard to imagine this discussion ending, if end it ever does, in anything approaching a consensus on that identity. At the very least, however, the interrogation about identity might have been expected to shed some light on the France–NATO relationship, for in addressing, as it presumably must, the exceptionalism claim, the interrogation should also turn, willy-nilly, to how France's identity has been conceived in relation to those 'significant Others' known as allies. And to the extent that a lowest common denominator of identity might be salvageable from the discussion, it would seem more likely to be extracted from the context of France's role as ally than from anywhere else – for it has been in that role that the most recent manifestations of exceptionalism have been said to be lodged, and it is this mooted exceptionalism that has been such a buttress of self-identification for French policy elites, and at times publics as well (Bozo 1991, 2008). Surprisingly, however, there has to date been little effort by anyone to weave the alliance role into the national identity discussion.

This is surprising because France is considered to be a country in which the concept of alliance is regarded as, at best, a mixed blessing. Now it cannot seriously be maintained that elsewhere in NATO, member-states are heedless in toting up the costs and benefits of alliance membership; to the contrary, all states tend to rivet their gaze on the so-called bottom-line question, 'what's in it for us?', in a manner that would put Scrooge to shame. It is just that in France the diplomatic niceties associated with calculating the costs and benefits are more regularly dispensed with than elsewhere, which is another way of saying that in France more than other member-states there has been a franker (more honest, perhaps) expression of a

suspicion that elsewhere gets diffused in commitments to a postulated collective identity, as well as to the collective good. To a degree, the French disquiet with alliances can be boiled down to a matter of trust, which is reflected in a generic and hardly Franco-specific attribute of international behaviour, best captured in what has been termed the ‘collective-action problem’. This refers to the problem of how to induce cooperation under conditions of anarchy, with states constantly entertaining fears of being exploited by their partners in cooperation, and suffering grievous harm as a result. Expressed in game-theoretical fashion, the collective-action problem becomes one of trying to achieve a greater social product via cooperation, such that the ‘surplus’ obtained by cooperating can be doled out in such a way as to make all parties better off. As Hale (2008, pp. 253–254) puts it, the ‘chief problem is that individuals can often gain at the expense of the greater good by “cheating” or, in the language of the game theorist, by “defecting”’. This is the heart of the collective action problem’.

If ‘defection’ is a general aspect of the security dilemma that alliances have traditionally faced (Snyder 1984), in the case of France there is said to be a no-less-important behavioural peculiarity, derived from a particular reading of the country’s own experience with alliances. The claim is that, more so than other allies, the French continue to operate through a mindset characterised by ‘realism’, and that they alone among the transatlantic allies have resisted the ‘constructivist turn’ (McDonald 1996, Checkel 1998) in IR. In a word, it is their ‘national’ and not the collective ‘western’ interest that is always uppermost in French policymakers’ thoughts, to the point of seeming to be *exclusively* capturing their attention. Thus, the argument continues, for reasons related to ‘historical learning’,<sup>5</sup> the French march to their own drumbeat even when they are members of an alliance. This is because for them, alliances have regularly resembled nothing so much as schools of hard knocks, sites of ‘betrayal’ – and worse. Coupled with this lesson, in recent years, has been the ‘outing’ of the one ally that, more often than not, has been said to let France down: the USA, at times aided and abetted by its ‘Anglo-Saxon’ partner in perfidy, the UK (Heuser 1998).

The upshot of this mindset, then, is that alliances generally are to be approached warily, and alliances led by America are to be treated with especial caution. To say again, the French suspicion of NATO never has been so powerful as to lead sentient decision-makers in Paris to reject *tout court* the undeniable security benefits of alliance; by the same token, however, the suspicion has comforted a certain self-perception that has ‘privileged’ the quest for identity over that of security. This desire to maximise the country’s status (its *rang*), through the frequent restatement of France’s own exceptionalism (i.e. as entitlement to oppose), has led to a policy that has been remarkably long-lived within NATO, where it has often been chalked up to an ideological dispensation known as ‘Gaullism’. This dispensation has resulted in the paradoxical situation in which France so often found itself over the past four decades, namely of engaging in intense competition with the very state(s) upon whom its security depended, its NATO allies and in particular the USA. As Touraine (1993, p. 808) explains, this has been so because French policy was guided more by ‘the concern for affirming what France “is” or should be’, than by a focused emphasis upon security. In other words, France has conceived of its problems not in terms of challenges to its physical security but rather to threats to its international stature – quite a different thing. The net result has been an egoistic alliance policy, in which

the fundamental concern has been with the country's identity, and not with its own or its allies' security.

### Plus ça change?

The case for an optimistic reading of the consequences France's reintegration will have for the bilateral relationship with the USA rests on two seemingly related contentions. The first is that in the absence of alliance-related tensions, the two countries would really have had little to quarrel about over the years, as they each want the same things in the international arena, and in fact each presents itself as *the* global standard-bearer of human rights, the cause of freedom, and in general all that is worthwhile nationally and internationally; in short, they are on the same ideological wavelength, and were it not for the complexities and contradictions that have attended their bilateral relationship *subsequent* to their becoming allies, things would have gone much more smoothly between them, much more often. This first contention assumes that the alliance-generated stresses could have been obviated had leaders in each country only wanted to make the bilateral relationship 'work'. This leads us directly to the second contention undergirding today's sense of optimism: happily, it is said, leaders are now in office both in Washington and Paris who want to eliminate those alliance-rooted sources of upheaval, doing so by the mechanism of France's reintegration into an alliance that will be, perforce, a more welcoming home for it than NATO has heretofore been.

In the section that follows this one, I am going to probe both contentions against the backdrop of theory; for the moment, let us try to establish a baseline indicator for assessing the claim that, in the absence of alliance-related controversy, France-US bilateral relations would be reasonably tranquil – or at least no more disturbed than the bilateral relationships that the USA has enjoyed with other western countries. After all, if France's reintegration is going to work some therapeutic effect upon the relationship with the USA, then it must follow that the latter (i.e. the bilateral relationship) would have consistently been a more robustly cooperative one if alliance dynamics had been healthier over the past decades. This is simply another way of stating that, to the extent the bilateral relationship deserves to be classified as having been suboptimal, the sources of suboptimality are to be found primarily if not exclusively within the alliance. But is this in fact the case?

I will assume that suboptimality *is* a reasonable way to characterise the relationship over a long span of time. But is it reasonable to locate the roots of suboptimal bilateral interaction *only* or even mainly in alliance soil? To begin to answer the question, we first need to know a bit more about the meaning of suboptimality in the bilateral relationship. Recall that reference was made above to the 'collective-action problem' in IR as an obstacle to intra-alliance relations, in the event those between France and the USA. We can extend the problem's applicability beyond cooperation between states in alliance to the more general, and larger, category of states trying as best they can to get along under conditions of anarchy. As a discipline, IR is sometimes considered to be not only a morals-free zone, but also a cooperation-free one. The reasons for the assumption that cooperation is necessarily a scarce commodity are familiar enough, and are often traced to what is (wrongly) called the dominance of 'realism' in IR theory.

But realism, with its expectation that anarchy obliges states everywhere and anywhere to be on the *qui vive* for their security, and hence to practice self-help (by definition the antithesis of cooperation), is only part of the theoretical picture. Contending bodies of theory, often associated with ‘liberalism’ in one guise or another, sometimes with constructivism, provide reason to believe that the realists woefully underestimate the prospects of healthy cooperation in the international system, even *in* the presence of anarchy (and I say this as a self-confessed realist). States, in this view, possess much ‘agency’. They can, conditions obliging, cooperate very closely, for ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ (Wendt 1992). They not only can cooperate, but also they can develop ‘special relationships’ (Dumbrell and Schäfer 2009). Although cooperation may be the genus of which special relationships constitute the species, the two behavioural dispositions are not identical.

Cooperation might seem like a vitamin-rich package, but in fact it can often turn out to be pretty thin gruel. For instance, it can simply represent an agreement to disagree short of war, as was the pattern during the cold war, when two superpowers, foes by any reckoning and friends by none, could withal manage their rivalry and enmity without making war upon each other (Nogee and Spanier 1988, Kanet and Kolodziej 1991). This was the kind of cooperation summed up by Aron’s (1962) superpower imagery of ‘brother-enemies’, faced with no alternative but to cooperate for fear of the ineffable harm they would inflict (and absorb) if they did not. Even well before the cold war, this kind of international cooperation was showing up in strange settings, such as on the western front at various stages of the First World War, when a ‘live-and-let live’ system of damage limitation developed between opposing front-line battalions, to the chagrin of high commands intent, through the implementation of tactics like trench raiding, to put an end to battalions’ ‘exercising their own strategies of cooperation based on reciprocity’ (Ashworth 1980, Axelrod 1984, p. 86).

So what does this have to do with suboptimality in the long span of bilateral relations between France and the USA? If Aron’s imagery of cooperation between ‘brother-enemies’ during the cold war can be taken to represent the bare minimum of cooperative behaviour, and if on the other hand ‘special relationships’ conjures up the fullest flowering of cooperation, then the kind of cooperation that has by and large characterised France–US dealings is to be found somewhere between the polar extremes, and deserves to be called mediocre, or suboptimal. This is so notwithstanding but rather precisely because of frequently voiced assumptions about the quality of relations between the two so-called ‘oldest allies’, and original ‘sister republics’, namely, that for more than two centuries they have been each other’s most important and, when the chips were down, reliable security partner. People in high places verbalise this assumption at regular intervals – most recently by America’s president, Barack Obama, when on a trip to Europe in the spring of 2009 he welcomed France’s ‘return’ to NATO by appealing specifically to the ‘old-ally’ imagery.

To understand why that imagery tells us so much about the meaning of suboptimality, we need to take a brief tour through the history of the bilateral relationship. At the outset, it has to be emphasised that the reason why the ‘brother-enemies’ imagery is so inappropriate in the France–US context is because of the near-total absence of armed conflict between the two countries since America (with French help) wrested its independence from Britain (Stinchcombe 1969).

Considering that the USA has fought with nearly every other great power in the system and quite a few lesser ones, it is certainly noteworthy that save on two occasions since its independence (the second half of the 1790s and in November 1942), America's military has not engaged in combat against France's.<sup>6</sup> This is no trifling record. Were it not for the fact that for so much of the time when they *were* at peace they seemed to be so almost grudgingly, especially during nearly the whole of the nineteenth century (Blumenthal 1970), we might be justified in deeming their bilateral relationship as 'special' instead of mediocre, 'optimal' instead of sub-optimal. But special, this relationship has assuredly not been, and a glance backward tells us why.

Writing in 1927, at a time when America had already been in existence as an independent state for some 150 years, Tardieu (1927, pp. 3–4), hardly an anti-American, observed that there had in truth been only a dozen or so years since 1778 that warranted being taken as evidence of genuine friendship between the two old allies.<sup>7</sup> More than eight decades later, we could probably tack on another dozen-and-a-half years to Tardieu's list, meaning that in its history since 1778, the Franco-American tandem has known perhaps three decades of genuine cordiality, and two centuries of mainly mediocre and occasionally just plain rotten relations.

This, of course, does not take into account the pattern of interaction between France and what would become the USA in the eight decades *preceding* American independence – a period that might, in contemporary terms, be characterised as a time of ruthless (if intermittent) ethnic conflict, of the kind, say, that we have been accustomed to seeing in the Balkans and in the developing world in recent decades (Peckham 1964, Steele 1969, Anderson 2000). There was absolutely nothing hyperbolic in Brinton's (1968, pp. 51–52) observation that, prior to the emergence of the Soviet nuclear threat, no country in the Old World had ever menaced American homeland security as profoundly as had France. Without denying the possibility that this lengthy period of enmity would have left a trace (and that is to put it mildly), and thus to have influenced the quality of their interactions after America became independent, it is really only with the post-1776 years that the following passages are concerned.

The first matter to note is how short-lived their first alliance really was. For reasons too complicated to go into here, there has been allowed to grow up the fiction of enduring harmony between America and the country with which it was briefly allied between 1778 and the ending of the American Revolution. I say *briefly* allied, because their collective-defence agreement had effectively become a dead letter with the ending of hostilities. Some think the alliance's demise was sealed as early as the Paris peace conference of 1783 when, in McDougall's (1997, p. 25) provocative term, American negotiators 'double-crossed' the French and negotiated a separate peace with Britain. Others maintain that it was the French, through their indifference to America's request for assistance in getting the British to vacate their forts south of the Great Lakes, who triggered the unravelling of the pact. In this view, France's unwillingness to help rendered the alliance moribund, even if it would require several more years for it finally to receive its 'death blow', coming with the Washington administration's proclamation of neutrality in 1793 and its signing of the Jay treaty the following year (Van Alstyne 1960, pp. 70–76, Perkins 1967, Estes 2006).

One thing is clear: 16 years after Yorktown, the two erstwhile allies were engaged in an undeclared, if real, naval war against each other (Allen 1909, De Conde 1966).

In fact, though still a nominal ally, France became the first country *against* which an independent America ever entered into combat. The 1778 alliance was officially put out of existence with the 1800 treaty of Mortefontaine, and if there would be brief moments, such as between 1812 and 1814, when they found themselves fighting the same (British) enemy as co-belligerents, they were assuredly not doing so as allies (Kaplan 1964). It would not be until 1949 that the two old ‘friends’ would once more become formal allies, with the Washington treaty and the formation of NATO (America having entered the First World War in 1917 as an ‘associate’ not an ‘allied’ power). In the meantime, for most of the intervening years, French society would more often than not demonstrate a chronic and basal anti-Americanism that on occasion, such as during the 1930s, could come back to haunt France (Bourget 1895, Duhamel 1931, Aron and Heckscher 1957, Mathy 1993, Portes 2000).

### **What does ‘strategic culture’ have to do with suboptimality?**

Whatever else might be said about the quality of the France–US bilateral relationship when set against the lengthy course of their interaction, it has to be noted that it demonstrates a remarkable degree of continuity. To be sure, the overall trend line of the relationship has been inflected by peaks and valleys, and as I noted at the outset, we currently seem to be atop one of those peaks, after having passed a few years back through a very deep valley. Yet the invariance in the trend (i.e. towards suboptimal cooperation), suggests that there may something ‘cultural’ at the root of the problems the two states have had with each other. Indeed, for a long time there have been observers of the bilateral relations willing to seek explanatory succour in culture; as far back as Year XIII of the French Republic (1805), this is exactly where François Marie Perrin du Lac was looking, when he published his account of a recent trip into the North American heartland, under the title *Voyage dans les deux Louisianes et chez les regions sauvages du Missouri*. Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, would an accomplished French observer travel in the New World to get a first-hand look at the American people.

Already the signs of tension between the two ‘first allies’ were too manifest to be ignored, and from his coign of vantage, Perrin understood the source of the problem to be cultural in nature, summing things up with the pithy observation that ‘[t]he guiding principle of Americans seems to be never to do anything as we do’ (quoted in Tardieu 1927, p. 64).<sup>8</sup> More than a hundred years later, André Tardieu would second that cultural diagnosis when, taking the measure of the bilateral relationship shortly after the ending of the First World War, he insisted that ‘instinct’ had kept, and would continue to keep, the two ‘sister republics’ locked into a chronically dysfunctional embrace. Things could never be improved, Tardieu cautioned, until such time as policy elites in both countries abandoned the destructive fiction that common republican institutions somehow enshrined healthy bilateral cooperation between putative like-minded entities, and recognised the obvious, namely, that the two societies were fundamentally dissimilar, and were so for reasons rooted in their respective temperaments.

It has been a long time since analysts of IR and foreign policy have made of either ‘instinct’ or ‘temperament’ a leading explanatory category, or at least have explicitly done so under either of those labels. This does not mean that they have been averse to exploring the social–psychological phenomena that might be said to result in a

national orientation towards a particular course of action on the part of any country. It simply means that they have other words, and other conceptual tools, at their disposal as they seek to establish connections between culturally conditioned social attributes and state behaviour. An earlier generation of social scientists, around the time of the Second World War, expended enormous intellectual resources attempting to discern the 'national character' that underpinned state behaviour. Today, such behaviour, especially when it involves matters of national security and 'grand strategy', often gets garbed in the conceptual raiment of an analytical approach that has come to be called 'strategic culture'.

Now, it has to be said that there are nearly as many ways of comprehending strategic culture as there are scholars interested in the category. Having played my own small part in trying to decipher the rubric's denotative content (Haglund 2009), I am fully aware of just how contested a concept it is. Battle lines have been drawn over numerous questions, perhaps none as important as the epistemological service to which the concept is supposed to be put. Is it, as some hold, possessed of enough explanatory oomph as to be capable of serving as an 'independent variable', so loaded with causal significance as even to offer predictive promise? Or is it rather a more modest construct, at best a 'dependent variable', more the thing to be explained than the means of explaining (Poore 2003)?

This debate will go on for as long as there is a scholarly interest in strategic culture, and for my purposes here I am going simply to suggest one way in which we might apply the concept in our quest for greater insight into the suboptimal quality of the bilateral relationship. To understand that application, a brief summary is in order. Basically, the epistemological dispute involves, on one side, those who are causally ambitious, and take their concept, strategic culture, to be primarily a *cognitive* category that alerts us to important symbolic and other non-literal means of knowledge transmission and value transmission, in the process shaping the development of a given country's 'grand-strategic' orientation, including but not restricted to decisions appertaining to the use of force in prosecuting its foreign policy. On the other side, are those who think of strategic culture as *context*, and for many (though not all) of these scholars, even though the concept might lack explanatory potency, it nevertheless can and does possess a great deal of hermeneutical value; thus it is a legitimate means of helping us understand how and why states conduct their affairs, either broadly or in a narrower, bilateral, sphere.

Without taking sides in this dispute, I want to concentrate in what is left of this section on the contextual not the cognitive dimension of strategic culture. What strategic-culture-as-context analysts seek to do is explicate foreign policies in terms either of (1) how particular states have acted in the past (i.e. their previous behaviour is argued to have great bearing on their current and future options); or (2) how states are thought by their own and other peoples as being likely to act based on the 'way they are' (i.e. their identity, or character, is said to predispose them towards certain policies). Analysts who employ strategic culture as a means of accounting for behaviour's impact often turn to *historical sociology* for guidance; those who prefer to put the emphasis upon conceptions attending identity also avail themselves of approaches with a long-established pedigree, at one time subsumed under the rubric *national character*. If both approaches are similar in dating from the first half of the twentieth century, a difference worth noting is that historical sociology has regained scholarly respectability after having been for some years in eclipse (Barnes 1948,

Smith 1991), while national character studies, under that name, remain controversial, though as we saw above, when repackaged under the label 'national identity' they not only become respectable, but also they become voguish (Chafetz *et al.* 1998/1999).

Whatever else might divide them, strategic culturalists are dissatisfied with structuralist accounts of foreign policy behaviour; they may or may not be in agreement as to the attainability of reliable causality, but they do accept that cultural context, and therefore history, should 'matter'. *How* history should matter, no one can say exactly, but many analysts have been turning to narrative to supply explicative energy, via an approach sometimes called 'narrative positivism' (Stone 1979, Abbott 1992, Ruggie 1995, Lustick 1996). The turn to narrative has led many of them to focus on the process (or phenomenon) known as 'path dependence'. Path dependence, as Pierson observes, stands in contradistinction to certain assumptions of rational-choice theory that claim 'large' causes should result in 'large' outcomes (Somers 1998, Pierson 2000). As such, path dependence will have an ever-more congenial ring in the ears of some strategic culturalists, whose anti-structuralist epistemology, coupled with their conviction that patterns of behaviour are 'culturally' significant variables, will entice them to search for the cultural origins and character of path-dependent foreign policy choices.

It is, of course, one thing to invoke path dependence as the mechanism by which history can be said to continue to matter in the shaping of foreign (including security) policy, for instance in the general, and common-sensical, observation that choices made long in the past can go on limiting policy options in the future (Skocpol 1984). Yet it is quite another thing actually to tease out, or 'trace', the process(es) by which path dependence manages to yield the context called strategic culture. Strategic culturalists exploring the behavioural component of context will find themselves being drawn ever closer to historical sociology, and will as a result have to come to grips with concepts closely related to path dependence. Among these latter, two stand out: temporal sequencing and contingency. For path dependence cannot mean sensitive dependence upon 'initial conditions'; rather, it must suggest a break point after which the ability of those initial conditions to shape the future altered substantially (Goldstone 1998). Some will label that break point 'contingency', by which they will mean the development required to have set in train a new inertia, one in which the 'path' led either to the efficient reproduction of cooperation (sometimes called 'self-reinforcing sequences') or the reverse, the efficient reproduction of conflict and discord (called 'reactive sequences') (Mahoney 2000). Which it is to be, and why, can be expected to provide work for strategic culturalists who take their concept to mean the 'context' revealed by behaviour, and who understand strategic culture as virtually indistinguishable from a country's historical record.

Significantly, much of the scholarly work in IR that makes reference to path dependence appeals only to one aspect of this phenomenon: self-reinforcing sequences. The logic of such sequences undergirds, for instance, accounts of how the USA has been able, via a 'constitutional bargain', to minimise worries that it would abuse its power capabilities and therefore inhibit cooperation with countries that, in the post-Second World War era and down to the present, have become its allies (Ikenberry 1998/1999, 2001). I have already said that France was an outlier from an alliance consensus that, most of the time, facilitated cooperation within the institution known as NATO; the phenomenon of self-reinforcing sequences seems to have passed it by.

This does not mean path dependence is of little use for explicating the quality of the France–US relationship, for there is another side of the path-dependence coin, reactive sequences, that needs to be brought into the analysis. Too often, this side gets neglected by those who profess an interest in path dependence. This is unfortunate, for what is analytically good for the goose must also be good for the gander: if there is something to the argument about history somehow ‘locking in’ patterns of behaviour (and I believe there is) then the process cannot simply be in one direction. Indeed, it could be the reason that the France–US relationship has been suboptimal for so much of the time is precisely because of the way in which the two have been locked into such a pattern of cooperation. Under the logic of reactive sequences, a pattern is generated in which discordant interactions prove to have their own self-reinforcing dynamic, making the future in a very real sense hostage to the past.

Seen in this light, strategic culture has a great deal to do with the ongoing quality of the France–US relationship, because of the interplay between the two states’ strategic culture(s) as expressed in the pattern of their relations over time. In other words, strategic culture, taken as context, not only applies to the individual units of analysis (i.e. the respective national identities or characters), but also to the relationship itself, such that one can speak legitimately of the ‘culture’ of Franco-American interaction (Terhune 1970, Kramer 1994). And it is that culture, or so I have argued, that is best qualified as suboptimal: not terrible, but not very good either – a culture, moreover, that leads us to expect that the general aspect of bilateral cooperation will be such as to occasion surprise not when the two states fail to get on well, but rather when they do appear, as at present, to be getting on well.

## **Conclusion**

It is wise to remember that it was not that many years ago when Paris first announced it was prepared to reintegrate with the alliance. Then, as now, the reintegration prospect was heralded for the therapeutic value it would bring to an alliance that had recently been going through some rough patches. Then, as now, the prospect of a successful reintegration into NATO was strengthened by the conviction that leaders were in power in both countries who were determined to improve not just NATO’s performance but the quality of the France–US relationship as well. Those leaders were Jacques Chirac and Bill Clinton, and the year was 1995, a time when opportunities for enhanced relations seemed boundless (Moïsi 1995, Grant 1996, Delafon and Sancton 1999). Yet we know how that particular story ended, and significantly, it did not require the arrival in power of George W. Bush to return the France–US relationship to its suboptimal trend line, for by early 1999 – i.e. nearly two years before the Bush administration’s onset – observers were once again remarking on how poorly the two old allies seemed to be getting along.

This article has advanced a thesis that could have come straight out of Dr Samuel Johnson, who once so famously quipped about dogs walking on their hind legs that the wonder was not that they did it so poorly, but that they were able to do it at all. In the spirit of Dr Johnson, we might conclude from this inquiry that while we should be noticing, as we have been doing in this special issue, the recent restoration of comity in relations between the USA and France, we should not let ourselves get carried away by the assumption that happy days are indeed here to stay in the bilateral relationship, merely because the French may be altering the way in which

they relate to the western alliance. For the wonder of the long-standing relationship between the two old allies is not that they cooperate so poorly; the wonder is that they manage to cooperate at all.

## Notes

1. It was written in 1929 by Milton Anger and Jack Yellen, and was featured the following year in a popular but now forgotten Hollywood musical, 'Chasing Rainbows'.
2. A poll conducted by the German Marshall Fund in July 2009 revealed that 77 per cent of Europeans (as opposed to 57 per cent of Americans) had a favourable opinion of President Obama; on the other hand, there are signs that European leaders think less highly of Obama than do their publics (Casanova 2009, Cohen 2009).
3. 'Suboptimality' when set against the assumption widely circulated that these two countries are really very old and successful security partners; thus suboptimality is taken as a measure of how short they fall from their self-advertised standard of genuine 'friendliness' and robust cooperation. I discuss this in greater detail below. It is possible that when compared with other bilateral relations they have, the quality of their dealings with each other is not out of the norm (though I suspect that when it comes to America's dealings with other western states over time, the relationship it has with France does rank as less cooperative than the links it has forged with other members of the group).
4. In fact, France has had far 'older' allies than the USA – Sweden during the Thirty Years War, to cite the most important example – and if for America France might have been its first ally, it was an alliance that formally ended in 1800, with the treaty of Mortefontaine, ratified the following year (Zahniser 1975, p. 70, Goubert 1991, p. 116, Wedgwood 1999, p. 241, 344).
5. Not focusing on France per se, but highly relevant to this discussion, is Reiter (1994).
6. The earlier instance of hostile action concerned French and American warships fighting each other in the so-called 'Quasi War' of the late 1790s; the later instance involved French forces loyal to Vichy firing at American soldiers landing in North Africa in November 1942.
7. Tardieu was a major figure in the French political class of the early twentieth century, having represented Georges Clemenceau as special commissioner in Washington during the latter years of the First World War, been an important drafter of French positions at the Versailles peace talks, and subsequently a cabinet member in several governments of the 1920s and 1930s, twice serving as prime minister (technically, *président du Conseil*). He was also a political journalist, and a leading intellectual of his era. In the words of one biographer, Tardieu was 'an intellectual colossus [who] strode through a third of a century of history wielding more power over the Republic than its constitution-makers had ever dreamed of' (Binion 1960, pp. 12–13). Another writer called him the 'bright hope of the French moderate Right: alone in a group of fusty, used-up politicians, he seemed to represent the new postwar world' (Bernier 1993, p. 61).
8. Perrin du Lac was a French colonial administrator who, for reasons both political and geopolitical, found himself stranded in the New World from 1789 until 1803, when he was finally able to return to France.

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