6 Poincaré President of the Republic and French Foreign Policy, 1913–14

The crisis of 16 May 1877 taught the embryonic Third Republic a lesson: henceforth Presidents of the Republic were expected to be feeble creatures. Despite the fact that nearly thirty-six years later when Poincaré became President the Republic was firmly established in France, the tradition remained unchanged. But the three constitutional laws of 1875 had never been altered. They endowed the President with considerable powers, though certain of these necessitated a ministerial countersignature. It was probably in the realm of international affairs that these powers were greatest. The President commanded the armed forces; he appointed to military and civil posts (which included Ambassadors); foreign envoys and Ambassadors were accredited to him; he negotiated and ratified treaties, and informed Parliament of them only when the interests and security of the state permitted it.

Before his election to the Elysée Poincaré was known to have supported a campaign for strengthening the executive vis-à-vis the legislature. In 1912 the publishers Hachette brought out a book on political science by Poincaré intended for schools entitled, Ce que demande la Cité. It demonstrated his belief in an increase in presidential powers to temper the excesses of a régime d’assemblée and to allow the will of the people to be properly expressed. It praised the President’s right to dissolve the Chambers, stating: ‘The use to which it was put in 1877 has since cast on this part of the constitution a shadow and discredit. It does not deserve it.’ More important still, Poincaré underlined the pre-eminent role of the President in international affairs. There was no doubt on 17 January 1913, the day of the presidential elections, that if elected Poincaré’s training and knowledge of the constitution would enable him to interpret legally in his favour the articles of the constitution. This is precisely what worried Clemenceau when he unfairly attacked Poincaré as a neo-Boulangist who dreamed of imposing by ‘force and dissolution his arrogant infallibility and his regal scorn for the constitution’.

The electoral college of Deputies and Senators which finally chose Poincaré to be President of the Republic for the next seven years did so principally because he had safeguarded and even bolstered France’s international position over the preceding year. The French press was convinced that Poincaré would be a strong President and generally acclaimed his election. A more sentimental indication of his popularity was the substantial increase in the number of...
babies christened ‘Raymond’. Yet the day after his election Paléologue, his old
school friend, recorded that Poincaré appeared to be in a quandary as to his
future role as President. He had reflected all night on the subject and feared
that ‘the principle of constitutional irresponsibility will divest me of all
initiative and condemn me for seven years to silence and inaction’. This was
evidence of his habitual self-doubt and proof that he was well aware of the
limitations of his powers. But the circumstances of his accession played a
substantial part in coaxing him in the direction of a strong presidential role.

Poincaré was the first example in the history of the Republic of an elected
candidate being a serving Prime Minister. It would be difficult to adapt to an
office which traditionally had little power, but much potential, without
wishing to use the presidential powers that lay dormant. This was particularly
so when that candidate was also Foreign Minister at a time of international
tension – a certain continuity in French foreign policy was imperative.
Indeed, the constitution allowed for the usual dispatching of business matters
during the changeover period. There was every reason for the new President
to maintain his presence at the helm of foreign policy.

Foreign affairs had been by far the most important issue of Poincaré’s term
of office in 1912 and the crowds who now acclaimed the new President did
not want any change. The prerogative which the constitution conferred upon
him for choosing the Prime Minister to form the next government would be
used to preserve this. One other factor would be important in assuring the
continuation of his foreign policy: the choice of Foreign Ministers. Although
it was not in the President’s power to choose the Foreign Minister directly, he
could exercise considerable influence by the conditions he imposed on the
appointment of his Premier, who would be accepted only if he gave his word
to implement the President’s choice. What conditioned that choice was the
Foreign Minister’s prior agreement to continue to execute the grand designs
of Poincaré’s diplomacy. As a further precaution he tried to pick men with as
little character as knowledge of foreign affairs to ensure that they would
continue to depend on him after their nomination. Consequently after 1912
the grand designs of French foreign policy continued to be motivated by the
need to strengthen France’s position on the international stage through
reinforcing her militarily, through tightening the links of the Triple Entente,
and through refusing any penetration of the alliance systems. But a new factor
would emerge after the First Balkan War: France would turn her attention
increasingly to protecting and consolidating her position in the Ottoman
Empire.

The settlement of the Agadir crisis by the Franco-German treaty of 4
November 1911 confirmed France’s protectorate over Morocco. France’s
colonial aspirations could now be focused elsewhere. Syria and the Lebanon
were traditional areas of French influence which had been badly neglected
until 1912 – Italy was seriously challenging France’s religious protectorate and
Britain her economic, and even political influence. Now that the Moroccan