

6 Independence and Interdependence: Foreign Policy over Mitterrand's Two Presidential Terms

Dominique David

Whatever their political sympathies, the French will for a long time see François Mitterrand as a man who wanted to represent them in all their contradictions and contrasts, however attractive or unattractive. In people's political minds, this two-term president will remain a symbol and direct exponent of two particularly French demands: an inconceivable shift of political power within the country and the need to resist external forces and steer a steady course that carried the voice of France into the world. In keeping his own voice, was Mitterrand, as a prominent symbol of the shift from one world to another, the heir of a dying century or the visionary of a nascent one? The debates around the final phase of his foreign and defence policy have not yet ended.

TAKING OVER A FLEXIBLE HERITAGE

It may seem too rigid to divide Mitterrand's time in office into the two seven-year terms, yet this division reflects accurately a parallel shift in world events. As far as foreign policy was concerned, his first term was marked by taking over a policy that was flexible. He had no choice, since the policy was dictated by an East-West block over which France had no control and in which France already occupied a clearly-defined position that had to be defended. The policy was also flexible, however, since within a stable geopolitical context, the new government made major changes.¹

Euromissiles and the Alliance

The first major shift in policy, which provided both continuity and change, was in France's relationship with the Atlantic Alliance and,

indeed, the Atlantic community. Analysts now refer in shorthand to the good relations between the United States and 'left-wing' France, citing the need for France to demonstrate positive goodwill to make up for the unorthodox presence of Communists in the government. This explanation is, however, only part of the story and ignores the fact that Mitterrand's position on Atlantic solidarity in general (and more particularly, on the deployment of Euromissiles) was consistent and pre-dated his election in 1981 by some considerable time.² It also omits the fact that this shift in policy towards the Alliance was accompanied throughout the 1980s by a number of clashes between Paris and Washington over such issues as GATT, the limitation of trade with Eastern Europe, the attempt to globalize Western security, the Geneva negotiations and the Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI).

There are a number of explanations for the fact that Mitterrand's 1979 'double-track decision'³ broke with the neo-Gaullist tradition represented by Giscard and for the fact that he endorsed it before the German Bundestag in 1983, when he supported the deployment of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) Euromissiles and in so doing, supported the German government against both peace campaigners and the majority of the European left. We should not underestimate Mitterrand's attachment to the Alliance tradition; his roots were undeniably to be found in the Fourth Republic and he was one of the critics of de Gaulle's decisions in 1966 to distance France from the Alliance. His intellectual espousal of traditional reasoning on the balance of forces was a major factor here, and during his first presidential term, it was to return like a *leitmotif*. There was also, however, the German argument, that opposing the Alliance's position and, hence, the German position was to jeopardize German political stability and Germany's commitment to the Alliance – in other words, to encourage Bonn to consider itself outside the Western community.

These arguments certainly explain the position Mitterrand adopted in the 'Euromissile battle' but also justify his constant *rapprochement* with the Alliance, which gradually found support in public opinion and which was to symbolize France's global position, which remained largely unchanged from the Atlantic Council's first meeting under the Fifth Republic in Paris in 1989 to its reiteration in 1996. One further element in Mitterrand's position throughout the 1980s needs to be highlighted, however: opposition to Moscow strong enough to be described as anti-Soviet.

This period, typified by the Euromissile debate, the Afghanistan war and the decline of Brezhnev's power in the Soviet Union, was not