

1. THE SEVEN-POWER SUMMITS IN FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY

a) Origins and Enduring French Conception of the Seven-Power Summits

Within the overall framework of French foreign policy, the origins of the seven-power summits, in particular those of the first such meeting held at Rambouillet (15-17 November, 1975) and limited to six participants, are indicative of the French government's enduring basic attitude, expectations and behaviour as regards this specific international forum.

As Putnam and Bayne² make clear, the early 1970s were a time of profound change in the post-1945 international economic system, brought about by the collapse of the Bretton Woods monetary system, the first enlargement of the European Economic Community (EEC), the oil crisis of 1973-74 and the ensuing economic recession. France's involvement in these events was central to the creation and development of the seven-power summits. Furthermore, the May 1974 election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as President of the French Republic altered the conduct of that state's foreign policy in a manner which proved decisive in holding the first summit by the end of the next year.

Giscard's predecessor, President Georges Pompidou, was a member of the dominant Gaullist wing of the centre-right majority coalition which had governed France since the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958. As such, he had been the direct successor of General De Gaulle, and had for the most part carried on his assertive and independent or nationalist foreign policy. The relative originality of Pompidou's conduct of foreign policy was twofold: first, it was shaped by the growing importance of economic factors and monetary questions linked to the systemic changes mentioned above; second, within Western Europe, it focused on a more active commitment to the development of the EEC, and the replacement of a Paris-Bonn partnership with what can be termed a privileged relationship between Paris and London, resulting in the 1972 entry of the United Kingdom (UK) into the EEC.

With the rise of the European and Japanese economies, the United States (US) dollar ceased to be convertible into gold in August 1971, and starting in March 1973 the European currencies floated against it. As regards American-European relations during this period, France, the dominant political power in Western Europe at the time, was capable of acting as "spokesperson" for the other major European states (the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), the UK, and Italy), or of effectively vetoing US initiatives, perceived as attempted reassertions of American political and economic supremacy amongst the leading industrial democracies. The major illustrations of France's influence during this period were the two meetings on "neutral ground" of Presidents Pompidou and Nixon. The first meeting was held in the Azores (5 December 1971) and saw Pompidou, acting as "Europe's spokesperson"³, obtain a 10% devaluation of the dollar in relation to gold, a significant adjustment on the part of the US following the August shock of "Nixonomics". The second meeting took place at Reykjavik (31 May-1 June 1973), where France vetoed Secretary of State Kissinger's ill fated "year of Europe" initiative - a planned component of which was a summit between President Nixon and the EEC leaders - in a manner exemplifying French

Foreign Minister Michel Jobert's practice of confrontation vis à vis the US.⁴ It must be noted that France's political power in Europe cannot be understood without reference to her sustained high economic growth of the 1950s and 1960s, which was to continue until the late 1970s, despite problems caused by the first oil crisis and delayed structural change.⁵

In an evolving international context, the May 1974 election of President Giscard d'Estaing led to a significant change in emphasis, but not a complete redefinition, of French foreign policy as concerned inter-European as well as American-European relations. Giscard had been since the early sixties, with one interruption of less than three years, Finance Minister under both Presidents De Gaulle and Pompidou. He was politically skillful enough to succeed these two men, despite not belonging to the majority Gaullist party. His expertise and interest in economic policy were manifest. As a man of the political centre, his commitment to the Gaullist tenets of national independence was real, but also unavoidable in as much as he depended on the support of his Gaullist coalition partners. However, his desire for more harmonious and especially better managed Franco-American as well as American-European relationships rapidly became apparent. At least four events signalled a new French willingness to defuse Paris-Washington tensions: first, the replacement as foreign minister of the confrontational and symbolic Michel Jobert by career diplomat Jean Sauvagnargues; second, France's cooperation in the final drafting of a NATO declaration on Atlantic relations signed on 26 June 1974; third, the communiqué issued at the end of the December 1974 meeting of Presidents Giscard d'Estaing and Ford, on the French island of Martinique, which referred to a spirit of friendly cooperation; fourth, although France itself had refused to join the new American supported International Energy Agency (IEA), in late 1974 Giscard agreed to EEC - IEA cooperation.⁶

Within Europe, Giscard reoriented French foreign policy back to the Paris-Bonn partnership, one which has since then grown more important and been confirmed by current French President François Mitterrand. Giscard was, with Helmut Schmidt for Germany and George Shultz for the US, a charter member of the Library Group of Finance Ministers, which first met in the White House Library in April 1973, on the margins of international monetary negotiations. Later to become the Group of Five (G5), these then irregular meetings of American, French, British, German and Japanese finance ministers accompanied only by a single official and sometimes central bank governors, centred on monetary issues but gradually came to cover a wide range of economic matters. Putnam and Bayne point out the originality and usefulness of these proceedings as follows:

The participants valued the group as a means of steering the monetary negotiations. But they prized it even more as an opportunity for frank, unfettered discussion of their major problems and preoccupations. Their meetings were very discreet and most of the proceedings were kept secret. They were not bound to a strict agenda or to papers prepared by officials. The participants could therefore express themselves with great freedom and build up strong mutual trust. They often found more common ground and understanding among their fellow finance ministers than among their own colleagues from other ministries back home. All this was a welcome change from more formal international discussions.⁷

The Library Group was to be the model for the first seven-power summit (Rambouillet

1975), which was itself to become a point of reference as the forum evolved. President Giscard d'Estaing is considered to have been the "undisputed initiator of the summits."⁸ The eventual success of the initiative he took must of course be understood in relation to at least three factors: first, a convergence of interests on the part of the future participants, in particular the American, French, German and British governments; second, a consensus as to the inadequacy of ordinary diplomatic practices and existing international institutions, in a context of systemic change; third, the advent of three new leaders in mid-1974, namely President Giscard d'Estaing, President Ford and Chancellor Schmidt.

The close professional and personal relationship between Giscard and Schmidt, as well as the good offices of George Shultz who had by 1974 left the US Treasury to work in the private sector, were instrumental in laying the groundwork for the first summit. The idea of a summit was raised by Giscard at his December 1974 meeting with Ford and Kissinger in Martinique. At the July 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe held in Helsinki, the leaders of the four Western powers (US, France, FRG, UK) and their foreign ministries met separately. Giscard d'Estaing's proposal of a meeting later that year, together with Japan, to deal with economic and monetary problems was an important topic of discussion. After further comments in the early autumn of 1975, President Giscard d'Estaing formally invited his American, German, British, Japanese and Italian counterparts to be his guests at one of his official residences, the Chateau of Rambouillet, on 15-17 November, 1975. This was to be the first annual summit of the leading industrial democracies. It must be highlighted that, at the time, the summit was considered to be a one-off meeting, and not the first in an uninterrupted series of institutionalized gatherings.

In studying the conduct of French foreign policy, particularly when focusing on involvement in the seven-power summits which were intended to be and, despite their impressive institutional growth, remain meetings between leaders themselves, one must know that the institutions of the Fifth Republic have created a concentration of power in the Presidency unequalled by the institutions of any of the other seven powers. The "domaine réservé" of foreign policy has become the ultimate presidential prerogative.⁹ Therefore, not only Giscard's capacity to give impetus to the creation of a new international forum, but the capacity of a French President to independently make policy decisions, fully control, individually direct and rapidly adapt his country's participation in the annual summit process are also unequalled by his peers.

Giscard's vision of his ideal summit is summarized in an interview he gave to J. Reston of the New York Times:

The capitalist countries seemed absolutely unable to manage their economic and monetary situations...but we never have a serious conversation among the great capitalist leaders to say 'what do we do now'...The question has to be discussed between people having major responsibilities like the United States - a matter of conversation between a very few people and almost on a private level.¹⁰

This statement reflects an enduring French preference for summits as strictly limited meetings of heads of government, concentrating on a few salient topics of a mainly economic nature, conducted as a series of unbureaucratic and relatively informal but highly

influential exchanges. Both Giscard and his successor François Mitterrand have shared a belief in the superiority of the political qualities of leaders, in comparison to the technical attributes of ministers or officials. The corollary of this belief has been the active pursuit of a "personal diplomacy"¹¹ in their conduct of foreign policy, and at the summits which are or can be perfect settings for this approach.

In what can be called the French conception of summitry, since it has now been manifest for the fourteen years of the combined Giscard and Mitterrand presidencies, the substance of exchanges is deemed to be of the utmost importance, while the effective institutionalization and development of the ritual character of the process, in particular as linked to its growing importance as a "media event", is harshly criticized. The French do not see the summit as a systematic decision-making body, but rather as a forum in which policy orientations of common interest can be discussed and eventually agreed upon at the highest level of government. The French Government considers commitments made at the seven-power summits to be politically rather than legally binding. When major decisions have been reached or made public at summits, France has usually been a key player in relevant preparations and prior negotiations. This reflects its political and economic weight, a certain activism, a belief in the possibility of policy coordination, and a clear definition of the national interest on the part of its successive leaders.

France has consistently resisted and did succeed in delaying somewhat the greater politicization of the summit agenda. It was also most reluctant to see the number of participants increase with the addition of Canada in 1976, followed by the EEC in 1977. Both these positions are rooted in a hierarchal conception of international order. Within the group formed by the seven states participating in the summit, France as a post-1945 "great power" has sought to limit certain key exchanges and policy orientations or decisions on political-strategic matters to its three major Western allies (US, FRG, UK), and to a lesser degree on economic issues to the same group widened to include Japan. Here, two essential distinctions must be made concerning the place of the seven-power summit in French foreign policy. First, France's own commitment to maintain hierarchy as a "great power" within the Group of Seven (G-7) has not been translated by Paris into this body's elevation above all others existing in the international system. In principle, France opposes the development of the G-7 as a sort of select governing council of world affairs. Secondly, the central institutionalized forum that the G-7 has become is not given the same type of formal status by the French than they have to recognized international organizations, such as the UN and its Security Council in particular, or the EEC and NATO. This is directly linked to France's conception of the summit not as a body systematically making and implementing decisions, but rather as meetings to discuss key common problems and give political impetus to their solution. In sum, especially as the passage of time has made certain aspects of De Gaulle's foreign policy positions less discernible, it seems clear that France does not conceive the G-7 as a "directoire" of the major industrialized democracies. This approach has been made more explicit since 1981 by President Mitterrand, whose brand of humanitarian socialism has resulted in statements of a more egalitarian view of relations among sovereign states, a phenomenon which has not in fact diminished France's commitment to actively maintaining its international rank.

This relatively modest conception of the summit on its part can only be understood in

relation to France's pursuit of national independence and wariness vis à vis any perceived American assertion of dominance. This basic characteristic is evident in French behaviour in the more broadly based UN international organizations, the EEC, and France's special status outside NATO's integrated command structure. Participation in the summit, potentially more constraining due to the forum's limited size, has not altered French commitment to an autonomous foreign policy.

b) Pattern of French Participation in the Seven-Power Summit: A Synopsis

Over the course of the summit's fourteen year existence, continuity of French purpose and behaviour has been manifest. This of course reflects the continuity of France's foreign policy during the same period.

As regards the five recurring key issues of monetary policy, trade liberalization, North-South relations, macroeconomic policy and East-West relations, since the 1981 election of President Mitterrand, it is only in relation to the last two that significant changes have occurred at the summit level. Under Mitterrand, departure from the macroeconomic policy consensus was radical but temporary, while on East-West relations, the change has proven more subtle and sustained.

Briefly put, here are the positions taken on these five key issues and which define the pattern of France's participation in the seven-power summit:

- a) A commitment to the stabilization of exchange rates through the institutionalization of international policy co-ordination. The development since 1985 of the Finance Ministers' G-7 multilateral surveillance function has received strong French support. France continues to argue in favour of the establishment of "reference zones", and periodically calls for reform of the international monetary system (a new Bretton Woods).
- b) Resistance contributing to delays in international trade liberalization, followed by use of the broader GATT framework to establish sectoral linkages, and form bargaining coalitions as a means of safeguarding French interests, especially those already protected under the EEC's common agricultural policy (CAP).
- c) Advocacy of summit leadership in responding to problems of third world underdevelopment and its destabilizing economic as well as political consequences for the international system, with a tendency to favour a structural rather than a more incremental approach.
- d) Conformity to prevailing summit macroeconomic policy, with the exception of the costly 1981-1983 experiment of Keynesian reflation at a time when the other member states practiced a strict form of classical monetarism.
- e) In regards to East-West relations, a strong commitment to an independent French foreign

policy and reluctance to see the summit transformed into an adjunct of the Western or Atlantic alliance. On this point, very real nuances separate Presidents Giscard d'Estaing and Mitterrand. Due to a more openly critical view of Soviet power as well as to a higher level of tension in East-West relations, Mitterrand has been more willing to actively demonstrate France's solidarity in Western security matters, although this has in no way diminished stated assertions of national autonomy.