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The Russo-Georgian War and Beyond: towards a European Great Power Concert

Henrik Boesen Lindbo Larsen

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HENRIK BOESEN LINDBO LARSEN
Research Assistant, DIIS
hbl@diis.dk

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Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS
Strandgade 56, DK-1401 Copenhagen, Denmark
Ph: +45 32 69 87 87
Fax: +45 32 69 87 00
E-mail: diis@diis.dk
Web: www.diis.dk

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ABSTRACT

The brief war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008 provoked vigorous international reactions among the European states as consequence of the sudden shift in the strategic balance. This paper argues for a focus on the great powers France, Germany and Britain as crucial actors for understanding the behavioural reactions towards Russia. It argues furthermore that reactions must be explained mainly from the perspective of experience based on past geopolitics, translating the external pressures into concrete foreign policy: France as promoter of a strong EU as global actor, Germany as bridge builder towards Russia and Britain influenced by Atlanticist commitments. As witnessed by the Russo-Georgian war, the Franco-German axis remains the stable element but backing from Britain is crucial to ensure band-wagoning of the Atlanticist-oriented states in Eastern Europe also in future international crises.

POWER POLITICS STRIKE BACK[1]

The brief war between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008 came as a shock for most international observers and was described as the 'return of history'[2] (after the alleged 'end of history' following the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the Soviet Union). Regardless of what one might think of this description, Europe had not known a conflict of the same dimensions since the struggles in the Balkans of the 1990s which, moreover, were predominantly ethnic struggles compared to a classical inter-state war. The war provoked an international crisis, triggering various diplomatic reactions from the European states, ranging between strong condemnations of Russia's role in the conflict and expressions of general concern with the conflict escalation or even (in one case) support of Russia.

Sporadic military clashes between Georgia and the Russian-backed break-away republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia increased in Spring/Summer of 2008 and the Georgian president Saakashvili, who already when he was elected president in 2004 promised 'reintegration' of the two break-away republics, set in a major offensive against South Ossetia in August 2008 where the main city Tskhinvali and Russian peacekeepers were shelled. Russia responded by initiating a major counter-offensive, succeeding in driving the Georgians definitively out of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Møller, 2009). This culminated with Russia's subsequent recognition of both break-away republics as independent states.

This paper does not seek to determine "who to blame" for the conflict and the international repercussions it provoked; what can be concluded, however, is that the war for Russia became an efficient means of demonstrating to the Western states that Russia is back as great power on the international scene and that the West should refrain from intervening in Russia's sphere of interest in large parts of the post-Soviet space. Not least, the Georgian war effectively put a stop to further NATO enlargements, since today only few member states would be willing to issue security guarantees to Georgia which – as witnessed – ultimately can lead to war with Russia. Thus, the Russo-Georgian war constitutes an obvious demonstration of the dangers and limitations of further NATO enlargement towards East. If Georgia earlier could be characterised as being in the "grey zone" between NATO and Russia influence, the brief war in August 2008 left no doubt that Georgia now again would slide back towards Russian influence. The events have forced the European states to rethink their strategic options and react to this new external pressure.

A MOSAIC OF EUROPEAN REACTIONS

A quick glance at the European reactions to the conflict reveals a veritable "mosaic" of foreign policy attitudes. According to Mouritzen (2009a or forthc.), the broad diversity of international reactions to the Russo-Georgian war among the European states can be summed up into four main reaction profiles: traditional hawks, emotional hawks, newly converted hawks and doves.

The clearest examples among the traditional hawks are first and foremost made up by the USA and Great Britain. The *USA* employed a

[1] This paper has been written as part of the project on "The 'Presence of the Past': Theorizing the Interplay of Past and Present Geopolitics in Contemporary Foreign Policy", funded by DIIS and FSE (*Forskningsrådet for Samfund og Erhverv*), cf. http://www.diis.dk/sw48833.asp.

[2] Kagan (2008) as referred in Mouritzen (2009a).

Cold War-like rhetoric, condemning the Russian "disproportionate response", reassuring support for Georgian NATO membership, transporting the Georgian troops back to Georgian territory during the conflict from their deployment to Iraq and later sending a battleship to the Black Sea with humanitarian assistance to Georgia. Furthermore, in order to punish Russia, the USA proposed the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council as well as Russia's place in G8. *Britain* reacted very similarly, reassuring support for Georgian NATO membership and wishing to establish a counterweight to Russian power (energy) policies in Eastern Europe.

The emotional hawks, in turn, represent the former "captive" or "satellite" states of the Soviet Union that visited Tbilisi during a joint official visit (Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Ukraine) and employed a very sharp and confrontational rhetoric not only against Russia but also as a means of criticising the European doves for their perceived too soft reactions against Russia. Accordingly, Georgia had to be offered NATO membership quickly in order to balance the newly invigorated Russia and aggressions against the Russian neighbours in the post-Soviet space.

Also "newly converted hawks" can be identified among the hardliners, i.e. the European states which traditionally have been non-aligned (Sweden, Finland) but which in the case of the Russo-Georgian war have exhibited sharp reactions: for Finland, foreign minister Stubb (as simultaneous chairman of the OSCE) and for Sweden in the shape of sharp historical analogies uttered by foreign minister Bildt. What unifies the all the categories of hawks is the wish, in one sense or another, to punish Russia for her role in the war – in the case of the emotional hawks, if necessary even with the risk of cutting communications with Russia.

By contrast, the countries adopting dove foreign policy stance have generally sought a strategy of binding Russia through socialising the country into European values ('Einbindung'). Russia should not be alienated, which may happen in the case of too sharp Western condemnations, and Europe should ensure its continued engagement in the Caucasus also in the long run. To this category counts most importantly Germany that avoided blaming either side for the outbreak of the conflict, warned against taking precipitate measures against Russia while underlining the mutual interests between Europe and Russia.

A number of other states pursued the dove stance (and the 'Einbindung' strategy)[3]. France, however, remains a particular case to understand: it was difficult to distinguish any clear French independent position, since France as EU president staked all on creating a common European position and acting as mediator in re-establishing peace between Russia and Georgia. The French position ended up somewhere between the hawk and dove position in what can be defined as the common lowest denominator, i.e. in a compromise between hawks and doves among the EU members states (ibid: 5-11).

THEORETICAL EXPECTATIONS TO THE GREAT POWERS

The case shall be made for focusing on the European great powers as relevant objects for understanding the behavioural patterns and alignment among the European states. France, Germany and Britain are states of comparable sizes and as during many other

[3] To this category counts also an additional number of Western, Central European and West Balkan states plus Turkey. Italy – in the shape of Prime Minister Berlusconi – represents the only case of a veritable Russia supporter.

international crises, great power alliances constitute the core around which international coalitions of the smaller powers are usually centred (e.g. the invasion of Iraq in 2003). When common action is taken in the international forums, the great powers become crucial objects of examination. In spite of being exposed to similar external pressures, the European great powers exhibit divergent behavioural patterns which requires an in-depth analysis of the intra-state characteristics of each case.

First, at the most simplified level of explanation, the structural realist theory (Waltz, 1979), it is expected that France, Germany and Britain conceived as billiard balls in a global system would exhibit similar behaviour as reaction to the shift in the strategic balance. Second, moving away from the most simplified level to geopolitical explanations also fails to provide sufficient explanatory power. From a geopolitical perspective, states are acting first and foremost within a certain geographic frame according to their geostrategic range of interests which, accordingly, make them prone to *proximate power balancing*. France, Germany and Britain, however, are each great powers with a geostrategic range of interests sufficiently important[4] to make them logically want to balance Russia as reaction to the international repercussions. Economic ties to Russia, e.g. dependency on energy imports, do not *per se* hinder any logical balancing of Russia in connection with the Georgian conflict.

Failing to find convincing explanatory power both at the systemic (I) and geopolitical (II) levels calls for an intra-state analysis (III), more specifically "bringing in the past" as explanation of the foreign policy formation processes in each case (see figure 1).

The intra-state level will take into account the historic specificities that characterise each state. It is assumed that each state contains a specific role conception developed from historic experiences that is expected to influence the foreign policy behaviour in concrete cases. One can say that each state is characterised by a predominant *strategic culture* where historic experiences has made up basic assumptions about the strategic environment in which the state is positioned and thus provides meaning to new external pressures to which the state is exposed (cf. Johnston, 1995). The concept of culture entails a certain degree of inertia, since shared assumptions and basic political-strategic goals embedded within a state only slowly evolve, lagging behind the changes in the material, "objective" environment (ibid.). Expressed in other words: based on lessons learnt from past geopolitics, failures or successes experienced by a country may serve as historical analogies for decision makers when faced with current external challenges. Past geopolitics, however, should not be used as a catch-all category for any occurrence that cannot be explained by the objective pressures of present geopolitics (Mouritzen, 2009b: 169-70). Past geopolitics in this sense is a luxury that can only be afforded under favourable external circumstances: decreasing action space means less room for past geopolitics, while increasing action space means more (ibid: 170-76). In the case of France, Germany and Britain, we must assume a high degree of action space, since the Georgian conflict admittedly represented a shift in the strategic balance but it did not represent any security threat to the states in question. This justifies a great deal of importance to be attached to "the presence of the past".

[4] France and Britain as top-5 world military powers and UN Security Council members; Germany as world exporter and economic power, especially vis-à-vis the post-Soviet space.

Figure 1. Theories, their levels and the specific explanations they deliver.

Level of explanation	*Theory / approach*	*Specific explanation*
(I) Systemic	Structural realism	Systemic balancing
(II) Inter-state	Geopolitics	Proximate power balancing
(III) Intra-state	a) Strategic culture	Experience based on past geopolitics
	b) Decision-making process	Perceptions / (mis-)information; bureaucratic bargaining

To sum up on the approach of this paper, it is based on the epistemological principle of explanatory parsimony inherent in critical rationalism ("explaining much by little", cf. Mouritzen, 1998: 146-48), starting out from the most abstract and simplified level of explanation and only if necessary from then on moving towards specific explanations. The analysis from now on is obliged to find explanatory power based on "the presence of the past". Should the analysis even at this level be deemed to contain insufficient explanatory power, we would be obliged, finally, to 'climb down the ladder' and further disaggregating the intra-state processes and give up the assumption of the state as unitary actor: examining particularities of *the decision-making process* based on approaches such as perceptions and (mis)information of decision-makers and bureaucratic bargaining[5]. The overall logic of the approach can be summed up as in figure 1[6].

The analysis of the great powers' foreign policy behaviour should not be strictly limited to the reactions to the Russo-Georgian war as such but meaningfully extended to include also the strategic preferences for Georgian rapprochement to the West, notably NATO membership/MAP (Membership Action Plan)[7]. Conceptually, the analysis should attach attention to the difference between official declarations and actual behaviour as foreign policy behaviour.

[5] Cf. Allison (1971).

[6] Adapted from Mouritzen (forthcoming).

[7] Possibly related to preferences for further EU enlargements. For both Georgia and Russia, EU membership has been a less salient issue than NATO membership but can meaningfully be taken as expression of general preferences for approaching Georgia to the West.

THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY

France played a very active role in the conflict as mediator between Georgia and Russia in the function of president of the EU. Objectively, it was fortunate for the EU's credibility as international actor that it was a country like France – with a considerable and experienced diplomatic apparatus at her disposal – that chaired the EU and could act as effective mediator in the conflict[8]. Even though it can be claimed that Russia anyway would not have advanced further into Georgia proper as result of "mission accomplished", the rapid deployment of an EU monitoring mission (EUMM Georgia) to oversee the ceasefire on the *de facto* borders to South Ossetia and Abkhazia can be taken as a witness of the EU's willingness and ability to act as reliable conflict solver[9]. Even though civilian in character, the EUMM has the clear aim of preventing new military escalations in the former war zones.

Sarkozy did not miss the chance among his European colleagues on several occasions of drawing attention to the role of the French diplomatic service and his own role as ceasefire broker between Moscow and Tbilisi. It remains clear, simultaneously, that if it would have been the Czech Republic instead of France that had had the role as EU president during the Georgian crisis (which would have been the scenario if the conflict had taken place half a year later), it would have a severe impediment for building up a common EU profile and producing quick results. Not only as the Czech Republic is a country of limited size with a relatively inexperienced diplomatic apparatus but it would also have seemed impossible to imagine the strongly EU-sceptical and Russia-hawkish President Vaclav Klaus in a similar mediator role. It is worth noting, moreover, that it is doubtful whether any other of the major European states in the function of EU President would have shown an engagement as eager as France that invested all diplomatic efforts for the sake of promoting a common EU position in the conflict, probably at the expense of formulating an independent position[10]. Sarkozy criticised Georgia for having initiated a military action but likewise criticised Russia for her 'disproportional' response.

France completely amalgamated with the EU presidency and her position was seemingly adjusted to maximising the presidency's practical efficiency as peace broker. Obviously, France had to adopt a pragmatic approach if the realistic aim was to act as mediator vis-à-vis a militarily advancing Russia followed by the quick deployment of the EUMM. On the other hand, France was obliged to "look behind her shoulders" to balance the multiple foreign policy preferences of the EU member states, since France in principle was acting on behalf of them.

We know from the French position within NATO's own ranks that France is one of the strongest sceptics against further eastern enlargements and a general Russian-friendly position that takes Russian interest in her near abroad into concern – just as France claims to have a special responsibility in her "near abroad" in Francophone Africa. France (along with Germany) was the major force be-

[8] According to diplomatic sources, during one of the meetings with Sarkozy, Putin had threatened to overthrow the regime in Tbilisi and string up Saakashvili, *Times Online*, 14/11/2008.

[9] To employ Sarkozy's own words, it was in direct contrast to Bosnia where it was the USA that acted but the EU which followed.

[10] When foreign minister Kouchner uttered some rather harsh statement condemning the ethnic cleansings in South Ossetia and the need for sanctions against, he was quickly corrected by Sarkozy, "Russie: Sarkozy contredit Kouchner", *Le Parisien*, 30/08/2008.

hind NATO's untraditional decision of holding out prospects of NATO membership to both Ukraine and Georgia but without fixing any date for the accession plan (NATO Summit in Bucharest of April 2008). French worries about the power balance between Europe and Russia were predominant, as exemplified by a statement of French Prime Minister Fillon: "We are opposed to the entry of Georgia and Ukraine because we think it is not the right response to the balance of power in Europe and between Europe and Russia, and we want to have a dialogue on this subject with Russia"[11]. The Russo-Georgian war could therefore only reinforce France in the perception that the original scepticism towards further NATO enlargements was particularly reasonable; offering membership to countries so geopolitically exposed would risk dragging the Alliance into a series of defence commitment that no member state in reality would be willing to live up to. The French attitude towards NATO enlargement is not unlike French policies regarding EU enlargements: the need to consolidate the internal cohesion power of the Union before plunging headlong into new risky commitments. French strategic thought is deeply rooted in the states and their interests as point of departure when defining policies (Colson, 1992). As consequence, international actors should recognise their real strategic interests and act accordingly.

Also subsequent to the actual cease fire brokering process, France has at several occasions tried to bring the EU presidency into play to advance an interest-based (French) agenda vis-à-vis Russia. France may have acknowledged the importance of signalling discontent with the Russian military action, which tipped the strategic balance towards Russia in the European neighbourhood. The most tangible (however, modest) response from the West has been the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council in which formal talks resumed in April 2009. This has been no impediment for France later stating that France and Europe would be willing to discuss a Russian proposal for a new European security architecture[12] and a strengthened EU-Russia partnership based on economic interests (Sarkozy, 2008: 726-27). Not surprisingly, the French position caused anxiety among many of the other EU members, notably the before-mentioned emotional hawks that wished more tangible sanctions against Russia.

EUROPE IS FRANCE BY EXTENSION

France's wish of promoting the EU as global foreign policy instrument reflects the fundamental ambition since the Cold War of promoting a multipolar world where the EU is transformed into a new power pole that could break with bipolarity and – today – unipolarity. France's lesson from the past is that her history-long global rank is threatened by the simple fact that the relative size of France as country is decreasing. France has lost her status of empire twice: the continental empire after the battle of Waterloo (1815) and the colonial empire after the bitter defeats in Indochina and in Algeria (1954/1962). In addition to French isolation from the great power game during the Cold War, also more recent geopolitics may play a role in the perception of French decision makers. The invasion of Iraq (2003) for France was a witness of the

[11] "France won't back Ukraine and Georgia NATO bids", *Reuters*, 01/04/2008.

[12] Medvedev launched the idea for a new security treaty from 'Vancouver to Vladivostok' which has given rise to considerable scepticism among most Western states, fearing the undermining of the current OSCE constellation.

dangers of unipolarity, which had to be balanced by the means available[13].

France is marked by this fundamental feeling of decline which France tries to compensate for through, first and foremost, an efficient foreign policy-oriented EU as multiplier of French influence. Only the EU has the necessary "critical size" to play an equal game with the other world powers which France no longer can play independently. Instead of pointing at a "critical juncture" that has shaped the French strategic orientation towards Europe, it would be more correct to conceive it as an evolving role conception over time. De Gaulle's original vision of the "Europe of states" was a model based on mutual agreements between sovereign states with France acting as political and military centre of an independent Europe free from external (American) hegemony. The idea of an independent Europe based on the simultaneous preservation of national autonomy created precedence for the subsequent French presidents (Holm, 2006: 97-101).

A rupture, however, came with Mitterand's idea of a "state-like Europe" that represents a model transcending traditional alliance policy and involves deeper integration between the nations such as a common currency, a common foreign policy and, eventually, defence[14]. France believes to represent a universal state model, the nation state (*"Etat-Nation"*) originating from the French Revolution which is perceived to represent foundation for today's liberal democracies. Due to its universal character, the French nation state can be exported as model for the entire EU, providing genuine political cohesion power for the Union to act as unified entity. From this logic, once France has merged with the EU (as multiplier of French interest), the Union is enabled to act as strategic actor[15] (ibid: 45-49; 101).

The state-like Europe has obviously shown clear limitations in light of the many member states (especially after the Eastern enlargements) which do not share the idea of a state-like Europe, thus contradicting the ambition of the EU a strong and unified actor. To some extent, this has forced France to redefine her grand EU vision. There is now no longer talk about a vision of a Union in concentric circles with a clear "policy centre" in which France takes a key role, but of a mixture between Mitterand's "state-like Europe" and traditional state alliances similar to de Gaulle's "Europe of states". The French role in the Russo-Georgian war seems to be a mixture between these two models (Holm, 2008).

This can be referred to as the "flexible Europe" model where an avant-garde group of the most ambitious states can launch enhanced common foreign policy cooperation and thus uphold a strong and capable EU 'of the willing'. Basically, it reflects a great power concert of states that are willing to take the lead which preferably, but not necessarily, will influence the originally hesitant EU members and make them join the policies of the core (Holm, 2006: 76). The flexible Europe (evoked by Chirac and Sarkozy on several occasions) can as such be interpreted as an incremental adaptation to the reluctant EU members in the periphery but it has the overall persistent element of promoting a multi-

[13] As middle-sized power, France pursued a "soft power balancing" strategy with the aim of entangling the USA in diplomatic commitments and signals of resolve to balance in future (cf. Pape, 2005).

[14] The change can as such be interpreted as a reaction to the fact that Europe never obtained an independent status but was deadlocked in the bipolar structures of the Cold War – an independent Europe should therefore necessarily depend on qualitatively different (state-like) characteristics.

[15] As opposed to the mere "civilian" power which is often referred to when describing the EU's power status.

polar world in which the EU represents one of the big poles.

The flexible Europe for France is naturally centred on the special relationship with Germany. It was no coincidence that the flexible Europe model was first launched in the German Reichstag (by Chirac, in 2000) as a natural continuation of the traditionally strong Franco-German axis. The Franco-German axis is founded on the idea of common history overcoming the old arch-rivalry and the creation of big common projects. Major power restructurings in Europe have often led to fear among French political leadership that Germany would try to reaffirm herself as leading power (ibid: 57). Whereas France has tried to establish alternative axes in more specific fields (for instance, with Britain in the domain of defence), Germany remains the long-term stable partner which France can fall back on. Compared to Germany, French foreign policy is, however, rooted in qualitatively different *realpolitik* features.

The French presidency has been a balancing act for the above-mentioned flexible EU model. On one hand, France plays the great power game with the other major European states, while upholding the vision that French power is multiplied at the European level[16]. On the other, in order not to hazard the Union's cohesion power, consent must be obtained also from the smaller powers in the longer term. Urgent crises, however, give way to the larger countries to take extraordinary initiatives on behalf of the Union (Holm, 2008: 87). A possible revival of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis in a more long-term strategic partnership between the EU and Russia therefore needs to take into account the concerns of the rest of the member states, too.

France's number one priority in connection with the Georgian crisis was to make the EU act as a unified actor and obtain concrete results through the settlement of the Russo-Georgian conflict. To this end, a high degree of pragmatism was necessary in the actual negotiations (since Russia otherwise may not want not comply), whereas the official EU declaration (as expression of common lowest denominator between hawks and doves) could be allowed to take a more critical stance. For France, the number one priority has been exposing herself as political leader of a unified Union capable of delivering foreign policy results, compatible with the overall French strategy for Europe. From the French perspective, the multipolar world represents a more stable world order than under unipolarity for which reason the EU necessarily has to play the role as balancing actor in connection with international crises. The French position has clear elements of Gaullist realism (balancing) but essential information would be lost if the observer would neglect the fact that French interests increasingly become synonymous with European interests. Some additional factors can be highlighted in this connection.

EUROPE AS STRATEGIC ACTOR

French identification with Europe transcends the economic sphere, since from the French perspective economic power can never be transformed into political power without coupling to credible military capacities. The

[16] The financial crisis once again allowed France to play the global role as European avant-garde that she so urgently wants to. It was the countries in the Euro zone that took the lead in initiatives for public investments and state monitoring of the financial sector, initiatives that were later joined by the other EU countries. Sarkozy once again took the new lead in convening the G20 meeting as representative of an economically powerful EU (vis-à-vis a weakened USA) in order to initiate a new economic order with the inclusion of the upcoming economic powers (Brazil, India, China).

construction of a European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) has become a key area in which France plays the role as defence avant-garde.

A number of reorientations in French security and defence policy have been observed during the approximate 10 years of the existence of the ESDP. Interestingly, France seems to have initiated a Europeanisation of the Africa policy in the traditional sphere of interest in Francophone Africa where France has intervened unilaterally on several occasions since decolonisation (Bergeon, 2007: 59). To date, three ESDP missions have been carried out in Africa in which France, being by far the largest contributor, tries to include as many EU partners as possible, even though from a purely military perspective it would be more rational to 'go it alone'. Obviously, the Europeanisation of French Africa policy is driven by political motives.

French 'reintegration' into NATO is another important factor. Albeit more symbolic than of practical significance, French reintegration has often been interpreted as a major strategic reorientation towards a new Atlanticist France. However, the French strategy has the simultaneous – and explicit – aim of revitalising the transatlantic relationship: a new balanced relationship where the EU formulates the big foreign policies as equal partner to the USA, once the Union has been equipped with a new affirmed defence policy (Livre Blanc, 2008: 98-102).

The construction of a credible European defence is a long-term goal for France, which from the beginning has encountered scepticism from certain member states, fearing the ESDP will start competing with NATO. For the French presidency, which already from the beginning had set the European defence as one of the top priorities, the conflict in Georgia, however, came as a welcome opportunity that stressed the need for addressing real threats towards stability in the European backyard. The Russo-Georgian war and the European success in the deployment of the EUMM as independent ESDP mission fell well in line with Europeanisation of French foreign policy with the overall objective of Europe gradually assuming *strategic* actor responsibilities. Therefore, France's EU presidency was an expression of continuity rather than change in French foreign policy over the last decade.

GERMANY'S BINDING STRATEGY

As mentioned, Germany chose a balanced position where neither of the sides was blamed for the outbreak of the conflict. Prior to the war, Steinmeier had been actively engaged in settling the disputes between Georgia and Abkhazia, where the conflict in the first place was believed most likely to break out. Germany sought a constructive role in which Russia was not to be alienated but to keep Europe's door open to Russia and the long-term settlement of the Georgian issue. This was in direct contrast to the 'emotional hawks', who sought a Cold War-type containment of Russia. As expressed by foreign minister Steinmeier: "Do we want strong-worded statements to air our frustration and our sadness of so much human suffering at Europe's doorstep? Or do we want Europe to remain capable of playing an active role in bringing lasting peace to the Caucasus?"[17]. Active engagement was deemed essential for the constructive de-escalation process between both parties.

[17] EU meeting of foreign ministers, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 13/08/2008.

More concretely, Steinmeier was in disfavour of any kind of tangible sanctions towards Russia such as suspending the EU-Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement and he warned against interrupting talks in the NATO-Russia Council. Freezing the dialogue has never led to the solution of conflicts, it was claimed. Germany supported the French presidency for having put an end to the hostilities from which point international mechanisms could take over the stabilisation process[18]. A small nuance can, however, be identified between Steinmeier and chancellor Merkel, the latter employing a slightly sharper tone against Russia, finding some of Russia's actions disproportionate. Nevertheless, Merkel also engaged in the peace talks by visiting both Medvedev at his summer location in Sochi and later Saakashvili in Tbilisi. References to the common interests between Germany/EU and Russia were predominant. Generally speaking, it is worth noticing that Germany both during and after the Georgian crisis has defined interests primarily in *economic terms*, stressing the EU and Russia as key trade partners, with simultaneous spill-over in *value terms*, i.e. a wish to ensure Russia's long-term socialisation into 'European' norms of democracy and human rights. This is in direct contrast to the French and British cases that defined interests first and foremost in *political-strategic* terms.

Germany has, moreover, been a major sceptic to new NATO enlargements, opposing both Georgian and Ukrainian membership with reference to the fact that NATO has undertaken over-hasty enlargements without the necessary prior internal debate and that further enlargements first and foremost must bring not less, but more security to Europe as a whole[19]. From this logic, the Russo-Georgian war could only come as a witness of the worst-case scenario of an overstretched alliance which had issued risky security guarantees to unstable states with disputed borders. Like France, Germany has equally expressed herself in favour of discussing Medvedev's proposal for a new European security treaty; this was welcomed as a new start for the Russia-NATO relations and as an option for continued long-term discussions[20]. Also in relation to the EU, Germany that traditionally has been one of the most ardent proponents of enlargements in the recognition of having a special responsibility for the unification of Europe, is marked by a new enlargement fatigue and the wish to consolidate the big projects already undertaken.

GERMANY'S NEW OSTPOLITIK

Germany's confrontation-aversive foreign policy orientation and abstinence from strong-worded statements is rooted in a veritable role complex that is first and foremost defined *against* the country's own past. The catastrophic events and atrocities committed during the Second World War has left a fundamental feeling of guilt in all layers of German society which has resulted in a pronounced wish for a Germany acting as righteous actor in international affairs (Stelzenmüller, 2009: 92).

In German foreign policy making, unilateralism is rejected *per se* and multilateralism regarded as a benefit in itself, almost regardless of the problems that need to be solved. Multilateralism, international rules and consensus-building are regarded as the most

[18] Foreign minister Steinmeier, interview in 'Rheinischen Post', *Auswärtiges Amt*, 23/08/2008.

[19] Foreign minister Steinmeier, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 03/04/2009.

[20] Foreign minister Steinmeier, *Auswärtiges Amt*, 29/06/2009.

suitable way of approaching international issues, transcending classic (obsolete) power competition[21]. Germany's commitment to the (development of) international rules is manifested by the country's strong adherence to international law and organisations for solving international conflicts (Krause, 2004: 49). The consensus-seeking sentiment in German political culture has simultaneously resulted in a general rejection of the use of force and sanctions as foreign policy instruments[22].

German efforts at redemption from the past have to a large extent been invested in the European project, which Germany (in direct contrast to France) sees as a project that is genuinely *European* and thus above any national interests[23]. For historic reasons, Germany has wanted to bind herself maximally to the European project and the collectively developed rules institutionalised within it. Horizontal and vertical integration are perceived as complementary: vertical integration because there must be a European identity founded upon substantial political cooperation[24]; horizontal because Germany feels a historic commitment to the geographical unification of Europe (Aggestam, 2008: 365-366).

The mere "civilian" or "normative" power status of the EU is seen as an appropriate "soft power" tool which makes it obvious for Germany to align with the Union's overall external relation policies. Germany's foreign vision is tightly linked to the EU's security environment where Germany can obtain influence, not through coercion but through the development of common norms (Bach/Peters, 2002: 9-10). However, what was observed during the Georgian crisis was admittedly a German foreign policy committed to this grand vision, but this did not hinder Germany adopting the (apart from Italy) most Russia-friendly reaction among the European states. What is essential here is the fact that Germany acted as mediator with Russia by playing the role as bridge builder that even surpassed French pragmatism. Again, history seems to be the core reason behind Germany's behaviour.

The historic traumas become especially relevant in Germany's relationship to Russia, which as formerly defined German *Lebensraum* suffered particularly hard during the Second World War. The guilt feelings is arguably a predominantly tacit factor in Germany political culture[25] but history is often evoked explicitly as worst-case scenario in contrast to the common shared interests and values that today exist between Russia and Germany[26]. Thus, the very conscience that Germany was responsible for the atrocities committed makes it impossible for Germany today to criticise Russia. Germany's abstinence from criticism of Russia can be traced back to one generational factor: among the generation presently

[21] Put in another way, the German security dilemma is a question of how to play a larger international role without becoming a threat to others which would (as proven by history) again generate behaviour disadvantageous to Germany (Bach/Peters, 2002: 11).

[22] As witnessed by Germany's very cautious steps towards troop deployment outside her own territory, this strategic paradigm has only exhibited minor changes in Germany's recent history (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2005: 343-50).

[23] To employ former chancellor Kohl's words, Germany's role conception has been turned up-side down from a "German Europe" to a "European Germany".

[24] With the Maastricht Treaty, Germany accepted to pool her traditional great power symbol (the Deutschmark) in a common European currency. This also includes the institutionalisation of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

[25] For instance, the Kaczynski twins' controversial claims in 2006 for German WW2 reparations to Poland resulted in few and very restrained reactions from the German political establishment.

[26] For instance, "The horrors of this terrible war, which affected the citizens of the former Soviet Union particularly hard, have not been forgotten […] An awareness of shared interests and values has replaced decades of ingrained antagonistic thinking and behaviour" (Schröder, 2004: 76).

in power in Germany, many have experienced Russia in the 1990s and look gratefully at her for having supported German reunification. For this reason, they are more inclined to attach importance to Russia as stable partner (Stelzenmüller, 2009: 97-98).

The perhaps most important factor, however, is Germany's self-identification with Russia. Germany's experience with the rise of Nazism is the story of having been a cornered great power herself due to the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles. This is a clear historic analogy to Russia's current situation: Germany's defeat in the First World War has many similarities to Russia's "defeat" in the Cold War. From a German perspective, consequently, the appropriate response is not confrontation but on the contrary a policy which tries to integrate Russia into a web of mutually binding commitments. Russia plunged deep into recession and chaos after the demise of the Soviet Union, a weakness that according to Russia's current leadership was exploited by the West during Russia's post-Soviet transition by forcing NATO expansions deep into the space of the former Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union. From a German perspective, the new invigorated Russia under Putin/Medvedev is a result of the humiliations of the 1990s, which did in fact only contribute to alienating Russia from the European values and Western influence. Sanctions or sharp criticism against Russia for her role in the Georgian crisis would therefore only contribute to additional Russian estrangement and eventually cornering of a strategically important great power. Derailing the diplomatic course would be equal to derailing the necessary dialogue with Russia which would risk deteriorating the Russia-EU/NATO relations into obsolete power rivalry for spheres of influence. Consequently, Russia had to be included in a dialogue on security on an equal basis with the Western community to ensure Russia's continued binding ('Einbindung') to Europe.

In sum, German foreign policy towards Russia is driven by continuity ever since the Cold War and the *Ostpolitik* of the Willy Brandt era. In a key strategy paper from 2006, the German Foreign Ministry describes the strategy as "rapprochement through economic interlocking" which is remarkably close to the strategy of "change through rapprochement" of the *Ostpolitik* in the 70s with the aim of détente between East and West[27]. Germany perceives herself as the most important bridge builder between Europe and Russia based on the assumption that the greatest triumph of Germany's soft power influence would be the successful integration of Russia into the rule-based European order (Stelzenmüller, 2009: 93-94). The German soft power strategy has not been fundamentally shaken by the war in Georgia in spite of the international repercussions that followed it (ibid: 99).

SMALL GERMAN STEPS

Germany's self-imposed restraint in foreign affairs does not automatically imply that Germany has no independent foreign policy. Since the end of the Cold War, it seems that Germany has adopted a more independent voice, albeit still insisting on the self-perceived virtues of "democracy", "multilateralism" or "civilian power". The fact that Germany *de facto* blocks US insistence on further NATO enlargements and plays the

[27] During the EU presidency in 2007, Germany launched three initiatives for a new EU *Ostpolitik*: a new Neighbourhood Policy, rapprochement to the Central Asian republics and negotiations for a new EU-Russia partnership agreement. Berlin, once again, advanced a common European position at the expense of putting Germany's own interests first (Stark, 2007: 793).

role as EU-Russia bridge builder witnesses a new self-consciousness characterising a great power. Already Chancellor Schröder declared that German foreign policy should follow "enlightened self-interests", including the protection of freedom and human rights, in what can be interpreted as a strategy for the political emancipation of a Germany that as minimum wanted to be consulted instead of (as in the past) blindly aligning with the policies of her traditional strategic partners (Forsberg, 2005: 217).

Again, the notion of flexible Europe becomes relevant as analytical tool. Faced with the inefficiency of an EU-27, urgent crises (as witnessed by the French presidency) has shown the need of rapid and coordinated action which give a natural role to the great powers as foreign policy pioneers. Former foreign minister Joschka Fischer declared the necessity of a European gravity centre which he, moreover, saw as a natural complement to the historical process of European unification[28]. Centred on Germany and France, the gravity centre should ensure enhanced integration as spearhead in the political development of the European community.

The practical unfolding of the "flexible Europe" model has been observed most clearly in the more controversial aspects of the common foreign policy such as the defence domain (ESDP). In accordance with Germany's gradual (however, cautious) acceptance of military out-of-area deployments, Germany has a preference for small-scale military operations or the mere civilian missions within state-building and monitoring (Stark, 2007: 798). Being assured that the ESDP will remain restricted to these relatively low key security responsibilities, Germany has shown real willingness to push forward reinforced cooperation in this domain based on a French-German-British coalition as main axis[29]. From this perspective, the deployment of the EUMM Georgia was fully compatible with German strategic preferences: a civilian border monitoring mission to ensure stability in the European neighbourhood which could, moreover, ease Russian concerns about renewed military escalations in Georgia and the rest of the Southern Caucasus.

While the flexible coalition model may seem as a potentially conflicting with German multilateralism as number one priority, it remains clear, simultaneously, that the original ambitions of substantial political cooperation with a common foreign policy based on 'European values' are endangered by European disunity following the enlargements. As long as it does not mean deviating radically from the original European project, the Georgian as well as the financial crises have shown German willingness of acting in great powers concert to address urgent needs ("effective multilateralism"), or in the case of Russia even assume an independent role as pragmatic bridge builder.

THE BRITISH HAWK

Turning finally to the British, Foreign Secretary Miliband described the situation as a "blatant aggression by Russia". He linked it to "threats to other neighbouring countries, such as yesterday's to Poland", thus referring to Russian threats to balance the then US-

[28] "Die Rekonstruktion des Westens", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 06/03/2004.

[29] For instance, the *Helsinki goals* or the *battle group* concept. Moreover, Germany favours the *European Security Strategy*, which in its focus on multilateral and comprehensive solutions to challenges such as failed states and regional conflicts in the European neighbourhood falls well in line with German preferences (Weissbuch, 2006: 38-49).

planned missile shield to be installed in Poland and the Czech Republic[30]. Optimistically twisting the outcome of the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 ((which did, in fact, give no date for accession), Miliband tried to reassure Georgia that the country would start its path towards NATO membership (Mouritzen, 2009a: 34). Furthermore, the conflict was used to argue for a strengthened European energy policy against Russia, thus enabling the EU to act as one actor when dealing with third parties instead of 27 member states easily being played off against one another[31].

A "second wave" of sharp criticism followed after Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent republics. The perhaps most remarkable act consisted in signalling willingness to contain Russia: Miliband visited Ukraine in the end of August, according to him to "ensure the widest possible coalition against Russian aggression in Georgia"[32]. In this connection, obvious Cold War parallels were employed: "the sight of Russian tanks in a neighbouring country on the fortieth anniversary of the crushing of the Prague Spring has shown that the temptations of power politics remain"[33]. Miliband furthermore supported Ukraine, which as a sovereign and democratic state had a natural right of deciding whether to approach the West or not; Miliband reiterated British support for Ukrainian EU membership and rapprochement to NATO[34]. The Cold War phrases were combined with a "democratic" rhetoric similar to the American reactions, claiming that every country has a right to freely choose whether or not to be part of the "free and democratic world" while characterising the Russian responses as belonging to past times' power politics ill-fit with the world order of the 21st century. In short, traditional balancing indicating real willingness to take real action towards establishing counterweight to Russia was at the core of the British reactions. Britain, however, did not wish to break relations with Russia but time had become to seriously weigh costs and benefits of the Russian partnerships.

Britain's behaviour is consistent with the country's overall preference for linking Georgia to the West by supporting the country's quick accession to NATO and reiterating this wish, in spite of the fact that this wing within NATO's rank after the Georgian crisis clearly has lost ground to the enlargement-sceptical states. This is a clear parallel to what concerns EU enlargements and the accession of Georgia where Britain (with the USA) has been one of the most marked proponents of the accession of new countries into the European community as means of ensuring geopolitical stability in post-Cold War Europe. Here, there is an American-British alignment in clear contrast to the Franco-German bloc.

THE "SPECIAL" RELATIONSHIP

Britain's foreign policy is guided by a fundamental balancing principle towards a sudden shift in the strategic environment which is related to Britain's historic role as balancing power in the great power games of Continental Europe. Contrary to both France and Germany, Britain is influenced not by a commitment to the European project, but to the self-defined "special relationship" with the USA as centre of gravitation for British foreign policy.

[30] *Foreign and Commonwealth Office*, 16/08/2008.

[31] *Ibid*, 20/08/2008.

[32] *Ibid*, 26/08/2008.

[33] *Ibid*, 27/08/2008.

[34] *Ibid*, 28/08/2008.

The existence of a "special relationship" consistently affecting foreign policy behaviour is by no means self-evident and the notion is commonly referred to as an *ideational* factor, even though from the beginning it has also been clearly rooted in *material* factors. The "special relationship" has been developed from the assumption that Britain still had global interests[35] – and a global military reach – surpassing those of the other European powers and, consequently, that Britain could enter into a close partnership with the USA by investing enough in military capacities and operations which would justify "special" access to influence on American foreign policy-making (Wallace/Phillips, 2009: 282). The geopolitical glue which held the British-American relationship together during the Second World War and in the beginning of the Cold War persisted in times when relations were less timid or even cold[36] (ibid: 263-67). The relationship can be said to have been revived at least two times: with the Thatcher-Regan partnership during the "second Cold War" in the beginning of the 1980s and again in the late 1990s, the latter revival being simultaneously the most remarkable one in the light of the disappearance of the obvious common strategic interest that existed during the Cold War. Under Blair and Bush, the relationship was centred on alignment to the American global strategy and the Middle East in spite of the two states' divergent understandings of the underlying security logics (ibid: 280-84).

[35] Britain is (in many ways similar to France) marked by decline, especially after the loss of the great overseas empire and the Suez crisis, which effectively reduced Britain to a secondary power (Cawood, 2004: 281-86).

[36] To British fury, the American Secretary of State Acheson declared in 1962 that Britain's attempt to play a separate power role based on a special relationship with the USA was "played out". The relations again cooled after the hey-days during the Thatcher-Reagan partnership due to renewed British frustration over American neglects (Wallace/Phillips, 2009: 266-67).

The "special relationship" was defined as a political or ideological superstructure based on a common history, language and values such as the neoliberal capitalist model that characterises both countries. However, it is also true that the "special relationship" by and large has been a material *security* relationship and that it relies on tight integration between the British and the American defence industries and intelligence services dating back from the Second World War. The British defence white books of 2003 and 2008 emphasised the trade-off between defence contribution and expectations of influence – in other words that interoperability with American command structures and ability to match American operational requirements are necessary in order to uphold Britain's "special" influence. In return for the heavy contributions to the operations in Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq, Britain has gained privileged access to American defence planning and procurement[37] (ibid: 267-70).

The perhaps most interesting aspect of Britain's self-defined "special relationship" is the alignment with the USA in the so-called liberal interventionist strategy[38] that peaked in the Bush administration's first period in power and which only now after the Blair-Bush period seems to wane (Dumbrell, 2009: 67-68; 76-77). While the relationship contains real strategic interests, it is simultaneously true that it is founded on an illusion that the USA has had a special and sentimental attachment to Britain beyond these common interests (Wallace/Phillips, 2009: 281-82). While American leaders have been oriented towards

[37] Such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter programme and the military nuclear cooperation where there are enormous advantages connected to access to American technology.

[38] Britain almost automatically chose to join the American-led 'coalition of the willing' with reference to preserving the vital influence in Washington.

the pursuit of real national interests, their British counterparts have often given away to sentiments, sometimes at the expense of the pursuit of self-interests (ibid.).

Dependency on the USA can meaningfully be taken as factor for the *way* Britain in which chose to balance Russia in connection with the Georgian crisis. Britain's verbal fire had huge resemblance with the "democratic rhetoric" employed by the Bush administration: importance was attached to Georgia as an alleged "free and democratic" country, thus emancipated from old-fashioned (Russian) "spheres of influence", which allowed Georgia freely to choose whether to join the club of free and democratic countries or not.

THE EUROPEAN PRESSURE

How then, in turn, understand Britain's relationship to the EU, which in spite of everything became the most important actor as mediator in the Russo-Georgian conflict? Generally speaking, Britain is still fundamentally marked by the old legacy of unambiguous commitment to the USA and ambiguous commitment to European integration (ibid: 281). However, one can convincingly argue that the gradual restructurings in the post-Cold War order, now 20 years after the fall of the Berlin wall, has caused a new pressure on Europe to become a producer of security. Not only did "Europe" prove helpless in preventing the bloody ethnic conflicts that emerged in European neighbourhood in the 1990s but there are now also beginning indications of declining American power, strongly fuelled by the economic crisis and the military deadlock in Afghanistan. These are restructurings which are not least expected to influence Britain's strategic legacies.

Despite the sharp rhetoric reactions, one should not forget that Britain in fact joined the common EU position, including the decision of deploying the EUMM. Moreover, another noticeable element was the will to strengthen the European energy market, thus establishing a common EU counterweight to Russia. This should by no means be seen as any sudden British sentimental commitment to the EU but rather as a perceived need to bind the USA geopolitically to Europe through a higher degree of burden-sharing of the security responsibilities. The transatlantic relationship needs to be reinforced in a model in which Europe at least can look after stability in its own neighbourhood but also strengthen NATO as a whole. The seemingly decisive boost occurred in early 2008, when NATO officials talked about a "Copernican revolution" in Washington's attitude towards the European defence which was brought about by Sarkozy's decision of French 'reintegration' with NATO (Dumbrell, 2009: 70). Arguing that an ESDP with only soft power is insufficient, the USA pushed for British support for an EU defence expansion. If Britain earlier only suspiciously had backed such plans, she from 2008 was urged by Washington to change direction (ibid.). A new British strategy where the EU assuming a more asserted role (as reinforcer of and complement to NATO) was therefore fully compatible with an ESDP mission to Georgia as stabilisation unit for the prevention of future conflict escalations in the European neighbourhood.

ASSESSMENT: AN EU-3 GREAT POWER CONCERT?

The EU consists of self-conscious nation states. When severe foreign policy crises occur, the real differences in foreign policy pref-

erences crystallise (not unlike the divisions over the invasion of Iraq in 2002-03). However, at this point, there seems to be significant discrepancy between the mere rhetoric level, where significant differences between hawks and doves remain, and the behavioural level, where little concrete sanctions to Russia have been applied (the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council being the most tangible one), presumably because it for the individual state makes little sense to sanction alone. Hence, at the behavioural level, reactions are strongly dependent on the great powers or coalitions of great powers, which in these cases (despite strong-worded statements from certain states) have adopted a predominantly pragmatic and interest-based approach towards Russia. This has justified the great power perspective to understand the European reactions towards Russia.

As demonstrated, there are indications that the EU-3 countries have shown willingness of undertaking enhanced cooperation within certain policy fields, either by coalitions of two (France and Germany) or by coalitions of three (France, Germany and Britain). The "flexible Europe" is a natural response to a less effective Union with 27 member states which requires an avant-garde group, if more controversial policies – such as peace brokering – are to be advanced in an otherwise all-encompassing consensus-seeking forum. Great power concerts simultaneously allows for more hesitant states at a later stage to join common projects to which they were sceptical in the first place[39]. This was seen in connection with the Georgian crisis when real foreign policy differences crystallised during the immediate crisis but where pragmatism took over in the longer term. In this sense, great power consensuses serve as main axes with which the smaller states may or may not align in their long-term behavioural patterns. Admittedly, the Franco-German axis here remains the stable element but backing from Britain is crucial to ensure band-wagoning of the Atlanticist-oriented member states, notably the before-mentioned 'emotional hawks', for whom British support is perceived as guarantee of American support and thus the preservation of the imperative transatlantic relationship.

Rapprochement between EU-3 as equal powers in a pan-European framework, indeed, seems realistic in the light of the fact that the states increasingly (however, slowly) adjust to the political realities and the world order that seems to be restructuring towards the beginning of the new decade. With beginning American decline (Zakaria, 2008) and the persisting "mismatch" between the economic/demographic weight of the EU and its political-military capacities (cf. Hill, 1993), a great power consensus would have the potential for reducing this deficit over time. It would then be a piecemeal development driven mostly by external shocks and not by internal visions. The great powers will have an interest in keeping the USA geopolitically tied to Europe and for this reason, the division between the "old" and "new" Europe can be expected to fade out (Mouritzen, 2009c: 72-73).

Moreover, if Britain and France to date have been "punching above their weight" as international actors, Germany has clearly been "punching below her weight". Consequently, if Germany's slow but gradual steps towards an asserted/independent foreign policy will continue in the future (as the past gradually loses significance), in the very long term there are prospects of a change in the

[39] The principle of a 'pioneer group' is taken into account in the Lisbon Treaty's provision for "permanent structured cooperation" in defence (cf. Whitney, 2008: 14-28).

balance towards Germany within the European framework.

RETURN TO THEORY

The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 for Russia became an effective means of limiting further NATO expansions eastwards and thus reaffirming herself as main power in large parts of the post-Soviet space. The brief war came to be the perhaps most marked international crisis in Europe since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, forcing the European states to react to the shift in the strategic balance.

This paper has made the argument for focusing on the interplay between present and past geopolitics for explaining the reactions from the European great powers towards the Russo-Georgian conflict. Strategic culture is an expression of historic inertia which related to specific foreign policy crises may restrain or reinforce action compared to what would "rationally" be expected and it adds additional explanatory power to compensate for insufficient explanation at the mere inter-state level. For France and Germany, experience based on lessons of the past could explain behavioural deviations from realist predictions: in the French case an 'overwhelming' identification with the EU which was almost allowed to *play an independent role*, and in the German case an 'overcautious' reaction to Russia where the past clearly *restrained* the present. In the British case, conversely, the past arguably *reinforced* the present.

The analysis showed no need of disaggregation to the decision-making level; generally, there has been a picture of strategic cultures that are changing over time but this should be conceived as slow adaptation to external pressures (based on accumulated lessons from the past), rather than being attributed to the individual characters of decision makers. This is compatible with the assumption that decision makers are embedded within an overarching strategic culture which downplays individual intentions. In the French case, there is a general role conception clearly oriented towards Europe as number one priority, which is seen as multiplier of French influence on the global scene but also this role conception evolves over time, resulting in the mixture between a state-like and the Europe of states. The German case, in turn, is strongly influenced by the past and the historic traumas only slowly wane over time. Germany contains the perhaps most tacit role conception (the past appearing often as a taboo in the German discourse), which nevertheless has shown to persist across major restructurings in international system, including German reunification. The British case, finally, represents a very rigid role conception, too, with the "special relationship" persisting as overarching political goal in British decision-making with no major reorientation since the Cold War. Taken together, all three cases represent old European states with stable, consistent role conceptions and strategic cultures which reinforce the explanatory power of culture and the lessons of the past.

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