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Review by Aurélie Elisa Gfeller, European University Institute, Florence

There have been many ups and downs in Franco-American relations. The 1970s were one decade in which improvements alternated with renewed strains. In his article, Marc Trachtenberg examines the first of these cycles, which broadly coincided with Richard Nixon’s time in office from 1969 to 1974. During the 1960s, Charles de Gaulle’s pursuit of national grandeur had set France on a collision course with the United States. With the inauguration of Nixon as U.S. president and the subsequent election of Georges Pompidou as French president, Franco-American relations improved dramatically. Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry A. Kissinger were determined to end the quarrel with France. In Kissinger’s eyes, a “strong Europe” was as essential as a “strong China,” and in this strong Europe, “France would play a pivotal role.” (6) Likewise, Pompidou was anxious to mend fences with the United States. By 1973, however, bilateral relations had taken “a sharp turn for the worse.” (9) “What went wrong,” then? Trachtenberg provides a cogently argued answer to this question by examining the demise of the Bretton Woods monetary order, America’s Year of Europe initiative, and the fourth Arab-Israeli war.

Economic issues, Trachtenberg maintains, played their part in the story, but “in themselves they were not enough to drive the two countries apart.” (24) After the closing of the gold window—that is, the suspension of the convertibility of U.S. dollars into gold—in August 1971, the French government insisted on having a reformed monetary regime based on fixed exchange rates. The U.S. secretary of the treasury, George Shultz, by contrast, wanted a new system in which the market would play a central role in setting exchange rates. Trachtenberg claims that although these differences made it difficult to achieve an agreement, the U.S. government was “content to live indefinitely” with the provisional “floating arrangements” established in March 1973. (15) French officials, he reckons, were not overly pleased with the U.S. failure to defend the par value of the dollar enshrined in the December 1971 Smithsonian Agreement. Yet, they were not prepared to
“go to war” with the United States over monetary matters, as Pompidou stated in November 1971. (18)

The key factor according to Trachtenberg lay elsewhere. Changes in the global political environment—above all, the significant improvement in U.S.-Soviet relations—strained America’s relations with its allies. Superpower détente, which culminated in the June 1973 Agreement on the Prevention of Nuclear War (PNW), triggered concerns about a U.S.-Soviet condominium. Such concerns, Trachtenberg argues, explain France’s sharply negative reaction to the Year of Europe and Pompidou’s shift toward “a policy with a sharper anti-American edge.” (37) This shift, in turn, prompted the U.S. government to harden its line. For all the U.S. talk about a strong Europe, “there were limits beyond which the Europeans simply could not go” in pursuing policies that differed from those of the United States. (55) As Trachtenberg shows, the Yom Kippur War and its aftermath brought this contradiction into sharp focus. The European approach, as Kissinger saw it, undermined U.S. policy by encouraging Arab radicals. When European Community (EC) countries adopted a plan for a Euro-Arab dialogue without consultation with the United States, Kissinger threw a tantrum. He made it clear that the U.S. government would not accept any such initiative in an area affecting its interests.

A particular strength of this article is its detailed and perceptive study of U.S. policy. Trachtenberg’s argument on the centrality of geopolitical factors is not new. Georges-Henri Soutou and Daniel Möckli, among others, have already highlighted the influence of superpower détente on Franco-American and U.S.-European relations.¹ What this analysis adds is a better understanding of U.S. motives. Extensive quotations speak of Kissinger’s efforts to explain the U.S. strategy to French officials. Superpower détente, Kissinger stated, was designed to achieve a balance between the Soviet Union and China. The United States would support China, or else the Soviet Union would make it “impotent,” turning Europe into Finland and leaving the United States “completely isolated.” To prevent a Soviet attack on China, however, the U.S. government had to pursue détente “in parallel” with the Soviet Union. (35) Kissinger may well have believed that this strategy called for a “strong Europe.” Yet, as Trachtenberg rightly notes, senior U.S. officials were eventually unwilling to live up to their words.² They would not tolerate an independent Europe speaking in a different voice from that of the United States.

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Trachtenberg also sheds further light on Franco-American nuclear relations. He convincingly argues that the answer to the suspension of nuclear cooperation in 1973–1974 lay in Washington rather than in Paris. By 1974, Pompidou had returned to an orthodox Gaullist line on defense. In February 1974, he issued a directive which reasserted the independence of French nuclear deterrence. At that point, however, the Nixon administration had long decided to put the nuclear relationship on hold. Kissinger made this decision as early as September 1973, hoping to use nuclear assistance as a bargaining chip. “The real quid pro quo is the basic orientation of French policy,” he stated, instructing the U.S. secretary of defense not to conclude anything with his French counterpart unless the French adopted a more U.S.-friendly stance on the Year of Europe.

Drawing on U.S., French, and West German government records and memoirs, this article is very well-researched and documented. It shows an excellent knowledge of other relevant studies in English, French, and German. It is also a timely piece of work. There is a growing literature on transatlantic relations during the early to mid-1970s. The existing scholarship, however, has tended to focus on Britain and West Germany. Trachtenberg compellingly demonstrates that France, too, was a major actor in the story.

Nevertheless, some portions of the argument are debatable. Monetary matters were more influential in the evolution of Franco-American relations than Trachtenberg argues. Pompidou had been instrumental in brokering the 1971 agreement on a devaluation of the U.S. dollar. He may have told Nixon in 1973 that economic problems between the United States and Western Europe were “easy to solve.” The U.S. refusal to safeguard the Smithsonian Agreement, however, had not gone down well in Paris, fueling mistrust about U.S. policy. Thus, Soutou is right in stating that the monetary factor played an important role in the reorientation of French policy in 1972–1973.

I also take issue with Trachtenberg’s interpretation of French reactions to the Year of Europe. Superpower détente and the PNW Agreement were certainly important

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background factors. But so were enduring French concerns about France’s decline and U.S. hegemonic intentions. Kissinger may have proposed a mere declaration of principles which could not by itself change anything in the substance of U.S.-European relations. Claiming that this makes it “hard to understand why the French reacted as negatively as they did,” however, glosses over the symbolic importance of words.\(^6\) (32) Political actors and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic were acutely aware of it, seeing words as a window into power relations and hence as a legitimization tool. Their perception of language explains why they fought a protracted battle over the wording of the planned declaration.

In the penultimate section, Trachtenberg moves on to discuss U.S. relations with “the Europeans.” Did Franco-American relations deteriorate because of a conflict between the United States and “the Europeans” taken as a whole? Or was French policy, notably within an EC context, essentially responsible for the worsening of the transatlantic relationship? Trachtenberg only suggests, without making a clear-cut claim, that both dynamics were at play. More problematically, he does not distinguish between “the Europeans” and EC countries. This semantic indeterminacy reflects the use of the term “Europeans” by U.S. actors at the time. Such use, however, was not value-neutral. It showed that U.S. officials did not quite acknowledge the existence of the EC as a separate entity.

Finally, Trachtenberg’s conclusion carries the implication that things may have turned out differently had the Europeans, and the French in particular, seized the opportunity of the Year of Europe to engage in talks over contentious transatlantic issues. The interpretation of a “lost opportunity” is questionable. It is doubtful that in 1973 either side would have engaged in a true, productive dialogue. (59) The Nixon administration may have wished to establish four-power institutionalized talks with Britain, France, and West Germany; yet, Nixon and Kissinger hardly looked prepared to give their European counterparts what they wanted, namely, discussions on an equal basis. As a matter of fact, new developments fostered such dialogue in the mid-1970s. After Watergate, a weakened U.S. presidency showed itself more sensitive to European concerns. In the context of the oil shock, European governments, for one, placed renewed emphasis on transatlantic cooperation.

That said, Trachtenberg has written an insightful and engaging article. His analysis addresses a number of broader themes such as the role of economic versus strategic factors in international relations, shifts in the international order during the 1970s, and the fundamentals and challenges of the Atlantic Alliance. Scholars interested in Franco-

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American and transatlantic relations will find this piece well worth reading and discussing.

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