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Aurélie Gfeller’s text analyses how and why French diplomats ‘Europeanised’ policy-making towards the Arab-Israeli conflict during Georges Pompidou’s presidency. This shift accelerated following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war and ensuing oil crises. It strengthened embryonic European cooperation over foreign policy and decisively shaped the early ‘European Political Cooperation’ (EPC) mechanism. EPC, the embryonic precursor of today’s European Security and Defence Policy, had been initiated at the Hague summit of the then six European Community leaders in December 1969, six months after Pompidou had replaced Charles de Gaulle as President. At the core of Gfeller’s article is the enhancement of EPC in July 1973, facilitating the launch of the French-inspired “Euro-Arab Dialogue” in 1974, which occurred against a backdrop of simmering U.S.-EC tension over policies towards the Middle East and energy supplies.

Drawing on wide range of diplomatic archives, the author argues persuasively that, despite President Georges Pompidou’s initial scepticism about either the desirability or feasibility of closer European foreign policy cooperation, French officials nevertheless successfully used the EPC mechanism to simultaneously advance and alter French policies towards the Middle East. Gfeller makes two arguments; first, that French diplomats worked to assemble a fragile yet tangible pan-European position vis-à-vis U.S. strategic and energy policies in the Middle East during the pivotal years of 1973-74. This involved Pompidou’s officials using European cooperation to gradually modify de Gaulle’s strategic imperative that French, and by extension European, power and diplomatic status depended first and foremost on maintaining a seat at Middle East negotiations.¹

¹ U.S. derision at de Gaulle’s insistence that France and Britain necessarily be consulted under a “Four power” formula was neatly encapsulated in President Johnson’s retort in 1967: “The four great powers,
Gfeller’s second argument is that, notwithstanding the largely rhetorical and short-lived nature of the Euro-Arab dialogue itself, this early chapter of European foreign policy cooperation of the mid-seventies bequeathed a longer-term legacy of European coordination over Middle Eastern policies.

For historians and diplomats alike it is tricky to simultaneously juggle multiple dossiers across several continents. Yet Gfeller successfully threads her analysis through a complex and dense tapestry of international events and conflicting diplomacies: superpower rivalry in the Middle East triggered by the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war; the OPEC boycott and hikes in global oil prices; new U.S. policies towards Europe, triggered in part by the European Community’s expansion from six to nine states, bringing British diplomacy (and with it deep-rooted but declining stakes in the Middle East) to the table at Brussels.

The sources presented here suggest that for the first three years of his presidency, Georges Pompidou remained doubtful about the EPC. Gfeller charts how, notwithstanding these presidential doubts, foreign minister Maurice Schumann had some limited success in securing EC states’ backing for France’s stance on UN resolution 242. However, it was the October 1973 war, escalating U.S.-Soviet tensions in the Middle East, and U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger’s pointed exclusion of either France or Britain from subsequent peace negotiations, which changed Pompidou’s attitude toward the EPC. The entry of the UK, Eire and Denmark into the EC in January 1973 had further modified the diplomatic equation ². Finally, and crucially for Gfeller’s narrative, in March 1973 Michel Jobert, a close confidant of Pompidou’s with ideas and experience of his own on the Middle East, replaced Maurice Schumann as head of the Quai d’Orsay.

By dissecting archival sources, Gfeller establishes that Britain’s Conservative foreign secretary Alex Douglas-Home made decisive key changes to pan-European policy which in practice strengthened France’s stand vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict. This enhanced what she terms the “Europeanisation of France’s policy towards Arab states” (665). Such “Europeanisation” culminated in the European Declaration on the Middle East, published on 6 November 1973, in turn laying the foundations for the formal launching the Euro-Arab Dialogue on 11 June 1974. The interplay between domestic (nation-state) and regional (EC) decision-making is highlighted by the fact that the diplomatic deadlock between the U.S. and French-led EPC in mid-1974 was only partially altered by changes of governments in both the UK and France. In Britain the coalition Labour administration which came to power after electoral turmoil in March 1974 was instinctively more

but who the hell are the other two?”. Quoted in Maurice Vaisse, La grandeur. Politique étrangère du général de Gaulle (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

Atlantist than Edward Heath’s outgoing Conservative government. Yet Labour did not torpedo France’s multilateral move. A month later in France, President Pompidou himself died in post. Michel Jobert stood down. In barely twelvemonths he had arguably established a higher profile than almost any other Foreign Minister in the Fifth Republic. In the eyes of foreign publics, this was due both to his vocal support for Arab governments and his reputation for U.S.-baiting. While undoubtedly Jobert was instrumental in advancing the Euro-Arab dialogue, Gfeller highlights that work on common EC policies towards the Middle East evolved in tandem with the drafting of what became the Joint-Declaration on European Identity. This was unveiled in December 1973, and she plausibly suggests that discussions on intra-EU policy coordination, with Middle Eastern policy as its most pressing issue, and debates over broader political identity, were in practice inextricably linked in late 1973. Kissinger had begun the year 1973 proclaiming it the ‘Year of Europe’ for US foreign policy; as Gfeller herself has noted elsewhere, Kissinger would later write wistfully that “An American initiative [i.e. his ‘Year of Europe’] enabled Jobert to pursue the old Gaullist dream of building Europe on an anti-American basis.”

Gfeller’s buttresses her overall thesis - that the watershed of 1973-74 was a catalyst in France’s embrace of a more pan-European foreign policy stance towards the Middle East - in part via personal notes written by President Valéry Giscard d’Estaing’s First Foreign Minister, Jean Sauvagnargues. Reflecting on the evolution of French power while on holiday in August 1974, just after he began his tenure at the head of the Quai d’Orsay, Sauvagnargues wrote that the classical Gaullist notion of French grandeur needed modifying, arguing that France’s future influence could only be secured via European cooperation. As such this nugget, excavated from the Foreign Ministry’s private archives, contributes to the perennial debate about the ‘Gaullist’ continuity of French foreign policy, continuing to this date.

There are unavoidable pitfalls when trying to cover such a vast diplomatic canvas in a journal article, most obviously how to prioritise competing dossiers. Gfeller mostly handles this well, focussing on shifting attitudes to the Arab-Israeli wars and Middle Eastern oil supplies, viewed through the twin lenses of the Cold War and rocky U.S.-European relations. More slippery is the vexed issue of terminology; in her opening paragraph the author proposes to use the term “Arab policy” to cover France’s general policies towards highly disparate – in terms of both their ideologies and importance as oil suppliers - Arab states as a whole. She deploys “Middle East policy” in reference to Paris’s specific stance on the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the author implicitly acknowledges subsequently, the problems of the Euro-Arab Dialogue project itself, and broader


4 For an update of such analyses which incorporates Nicolas Sarkozy’s policies, see Frederic Charillon, La politique étrangère de la France : De la fin de la guerre froide au printemps arabe, (La Documentation française: Paris, 2011).
multilateral diplomacy towards the region during 1973-75, stemmed from the impossibility of convincingly separating these two strands of policy: Israel/Palestine on one hand; oil supplies and pricing on the other. The October 1973 war re-cast and hardened the regional fault-lines, both enriching and emboldening the stance of radical Arab republics such as Iraq and Algeria vis-à-vis Western powers and conservative monarchies within Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

Thus while the advances in European political cooperation which Gfeller narrates during this period are undeniable, a competing case can be made that tentative moves towards pan-European cooperation, while real, were largely eclipsed in importance by far greater bilateral activism towards oil-rich Arab states on the part of key European states in the mid-1970s. The war of October 1973 posed specific problems for each of Europe’s chancelleries. In Paris these included the fact that Pompidou was further pilloried in the U.S. and Israel due to Libya’s ‘loan’ of French-built Mirage jets to Egypt during the 1973 war. Yet broadly each European power with oil industries rooted in the Middle East (notably France, the UK and Italy) had to swiftly and radically rethink trade policies with the region, securing oil supplies while shoring-up their balances of trade with the Middle Eastern states via an expansion of civilian and military exports.

This shift is epitomised by French diplomacy, incarnated by Michel Jobert, whose year as Pompidou’s final foreign minister (1973-74) was dominated by energy, Arab and Middle Eastern dossiers. In Gfeller’s narrative Jobert is portrayed as largely having extended policies initiated by his predecessor, Maurice Schumann. However, this underplays the impact that he and other advisors had upon the longer-term evolution of policy. It also begs a series of questions about the underlying influences upon foreign policy-making as a whole. Jobert himself had occupied the pivotal post of Secretary-General of the Elysée ever since Pompidou’s election in May 1969. For those four years he had also been the President’s principal advisor on oil and energy issues, including overseeing negotiations with the Algerian government’s over oil nationalization in 1971, a crucial watershed in metropolitan France’s fraught relationship with the Maghreb. Thus the extensive media coverage given to Jobert’s courting of Arab leaders during his brief tenure in the Quai d’Orsay partially obscured the fact that he had long held influence over Gaullist thinking.

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5 Somewhat paradoxically (given France’s subsequent leading role in Colonel Qadaffi’s 2011 overthrow) the prospect of Dassault winning contracts to supply Libya with spares and new Rafale fighter jets was a key part of Nicolas Sarkozy’s rapprochement with Qadaffi in 2007. See David Systen “The Revival of Franco-Libya Relations” in Emmanuel Godin and Natalya Vince (eds.). France and the Mediterranean: International Relations, Culture and Politics (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011)

6 It is salutary to note that a full forty years later, Jobert’s Algerian counterpart in those 1971 nationalization negotiations, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, remains at the heart of the Algerian state, currently as President.
on the Middle East, and indeed continued to exert considerable intellectual influence after he left office.  

This in no way negates Gfeller’s arguments, but one can question whether a relatively unitary analysis of French foreign policy actors sufficiently dissects the motivations and mechanisms driving decision-making. It remains for subsequent scholars to disaggregate French policy pressures. Did the President’s office unambiguously direct policy via the Quai d’Orsay? To what degree did powerful Secretary Generals of the Elysée influence policy priorities? In relation to the dossiers treated by Gfeller, the influence of France’s dominant oil companies, Total and Elf, both of which in rather different ways were creations of the state, surely requires further investigation.

Gfeller plausibly argues that in relation to her central argument over the EPC, “ironically, oil per se was not a factor driving French policy” (668). However, as she notes earlier in the text, this was both because the U.S. insisted that oil be excluded from the Euro-Arab dialogue (666), and the fact that France and Britain had each already signed preferential bi-lateral oil supply contracts with a variety of Arab OPEC states. While the need to secure supplies decisively influenced the oil companies’ lobbying of government, French administrations were simultaneously aware of the need to adopt far more mercantile policies towards oil-rich states, intensifying competition for civilian and military markets in the Middle East now awash with dollars.

An additional oil-related avenue not fully explored by Gfeller is exactly how Euro-U.S. tensions and diplomacy around the EPC and Euro-Arab Dialogue played out against the parallel emergence of the U.S.-sponsored oil consumers’ cartel, the International Energy Agency (IEA). Equally, given the article title’s emphasis on both superpowers, an insight into the evolution of France’s relations with the USSR over the Middle East during this pivotal period would be useful, not least because Franco-Soviet tension had long been manifest in Middle Eastern oilfields and détente necessarily influenced Gaullist strategy.

Notwithstanding such queries, the article sheds considerable historical light, from Parisian and other sources, on a neglected aspect of history. Gfeller herself notes the legacies and long shadows from this period only fleetingly in her conclusion (669). Yet her argument that this period sowed the seeds of a specifically European set of policies towards the Arab-Israeli conflict is sound. Indeed, the genealogies of, and tensions between, a specifically French vision of European-Arab ties, and those of other

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7 See the writings and ideas collected in, Michel Jobert, *Ni dieu ni diable: Conversations avec Jean-Louis Remilleux* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). Jobert’s eclectic political profile is reflected by the fact that his second ministerial role was under François Mitterrand, holding the External Trade portfolio under premier Pierre Mauroy.

governments in Europe, run through successive EU-Arab frameworks of recent decades. Such tensions are all the clearer given the manner in which the manifest failings of such frameworks were laid bare by the ‘Arab spring’ of 2011.9

Gfeller’s text has the merits of acknowledging the sheer complexity of overlapping issues and cross-cutting, global and regional, multilateral and bi-lateral relations, at time of institutional flux. As such it provides a useful addition to French diplomatic history. Further elaboration of the themes of this article can be found in her 2008 Princeton thesis, and subsequent publications which draw on it.10

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