

François Hollande's policy on Syria offers a perfect example of how not to conduct international politics

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*While the British parliament has effectively ruled out UK intervention in the Syrian conflict, French President François Hollande has been adamant that France will take part in any US-led military strikes against the country. **John Gaffney** writes that in contrast to the UK and the United States, who have sought parliamentary and congressional approval for their policy on Syria, Hollande has attempted to act unilaterally. He argues that the extent to which France now has to wait on the US before acting, and the growing pressure on Hollande to seek approval from the French parliament, have placed the President in an extremely weak position.*



There is an irony in the fact that America's oldest ally, France, has become its newest best friend. An irony in that it is not really true; rather, it is a diplomatic accident, born of David Cameron's hurried and unsuccessful [attempt](#) on 30 August in the UK Houses of Parliament to get backing for military action, and French President Hollande's decision to virtually declare war on Syria without even consulting anyone else in Europe or in the French political class.

After the shock of the UK's vote, even Obama decided to consult his own Congress to maintain legitimacy and regain time. He even referred to the UK's role, but made no reference to France at all. As a result of both Cameron and Obama asking for parliamentary approval, the French have been left isolated internationally and in political chaos domestically. France's decision to wait until the G20 summit of 5-6 September before even beginning to build a coalition within and beyond Europe is also a sign of real disarray.

There's another irony – the period of the early American Republic John Kerry was referring to when France and America were allies, was an early example of catastrophic French miscalculation. France did back America, overstretched itself, and triggered the French Revolution of 1789. As Gustave Flaubert said, 'irony takes nothing away from pathos'. President Hollande should pay attention to history. French standing in international politics is always highest when it cautions against military might, and searches for a diplomatic position as the voice of old Europe counselling the New World. When de Gaulle told Kennedy, then Johnson, to stay out of Vietnam, his international standing skyrocketed. When Chirac told Bush not to go into Iraq, the same thing happened. And both, incidentally, were right.



François Hollande, Credit: france diplomatie (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

France and Syria: doing it all wrong

My intention here is not to debate whether it is right to attack Syria. Rather, it is to examine how and why French policy over Syria has become an abysmal example of how to conduct international politics. The miscalculations are

related to the presidential nature of the Fifth Republic itself. What the events of early September have shown is that as a result of the French President's ability to act with greater impunity than his counterparts, he is in greater danger of making mistakes. He is weak because he is strong.

In fact, all said and done, both David Cameron and Ed Miliband have come out of the 30 August vote not looking too bad. And they are off the hook for now. Democracy has spoken. François Hollande has hitched his wagon solely to the United States without being sure whether the wagon is going anywhere; and in the name of France's Universalist mission (which in this case is more like presidential caprice) is having to wait two weeks to find out. As a result, all the war leader kudos gained from the [Mali expedition](#) in January 2013 has been squandered, and Hollande's lack of foreign policy experience reaffirmed. He has made Sarkozy's action over Libya in 2011 seem positively artful.

Yet another irony is that while both the UK and the US sought legitimation through democracy, the French President seems able to go to war under his own initiative. As a consequence, France has not appeared particularly democratic in comparison. And irony of ironies, the left-wing Socialist Leader of the House, Claude Bartolone, argued on 4 September against a parliamentary vote on the very Gaullist grounds that it would undermine the President's constitutional (arbitrary) authority. Despite this, there probably will need to be a vote of some kind in a week or so.

But whatever the French do now, the authority of the French presidency has been severely damaged and the Fifth Republic altered because, ultimately, Hollande can't do what he wants. This was in part because the French President acted before he knew what the Americans were doing (and in spite of the noise, the French have no intention of acting alone), in part because public confidence in Hollande is so low that his legitimacy to act has vanished.

Until the US Congress agrees to Obama's request, the French can only talk about the one thing they are not doing, namely 'punishing' Syria. The consequence is that the air is thick with sound and fury signifying very little, like the leader of the Socialist Party, Harlem Désir, accusing opponents of cowardice similar to that of those who would not stand up to Hitler.

The personal and moral dimension to French politics

This brings us to an issue of crucial importance for understanding the vagaries of French politics, which is that, even more than the American presidency, French politics is overtly personalised, and depends upon a highly emotional language that insists upon morality more than it does upon law. When the US told everyone in August 2013 to get their embassy officials out of Yemen, the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office made the announcement for the UK. In France, the President himself made the announcement to the press, and made it as if it were a purely French and personal decision rather than a coordinated European and American one. As regards morality, when President Hollande last week implied immediate action against Syria, he said it was to punish Assad for using chemical weapons. He would have done better to simply say that it was illegal.

In one sense, Hollande has, for not the first time, been saved by the right which is, as ever, in total disarray. For the last ten days the right has been saying everything and its opposite about Syria, and about the President's prerogatives, the spirit of the Fifth Republic, about the rights of parliament, and the role of the United Nations. No one, right or left, has offered reflection or clarity, let alone leadership.

The French government is waiting for the Americans, and now for the UN chemical weapons inspectors' report, while bombarding the French public with heart-breaking videos of suffering children (but which are not proof of anything). There is very little discussion of whether 'punishing' Assad (whatever that means) runs the huge risk of making the civil war in Syria worse, dragging Lebanon, Iran, and Israel into the conflict, alienating the Russians for decades, and having no plan at all if Assad falls, or if Assad doesn't.

I said this article was not about the rights and wrongs of attacking Syria. Ironically enough, the uncoordinated and

confused international reaction to the appalling events in Syria has created a potential dynamic for a major non-military initiative supported by nearly everyone. If France could lead on that, it would show its real stature, because, on a good day, no one can lead Europe and embody its best traditions better than the French.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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