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French War Aims and Strategy

Basically, the strategy of the French during the First World War was largely influenced by their evolving war aims. The idea was not just to win the war, but to realise, through and during the war, a not absolutely but largely constant set of war aims. It was a clearly Clausewitzian relationship, with war being indeed the continuation of politics.

It would be useful first to remind ourselves of the overall frame of mind of the French in 1914. After the (in the eyes of the post-1870 generations) dangerous experiments of Napoléon III with the “Nationalities Principle”, they generally supported the concept of a European balance of power, underpinned by a system of permanent consultations among the major Powers. At the same time they were convinced that when the Emperor Franz Joseph died, the cards would be redealt and the Dual Monarchy would disappear. Austria would join Germany. As compensation, in terms of the European balance, France would recover Alsace-Lorraine – probably through a general congress. Much the same went for the Ottoman Empire, where France also nourished long-term goals.¹

Even so, during the years between the First Moroccan Crisis in 1905 and 1914, the French had been divided on how the European balance could best be maintained. A minority recommended negotiating with Germany without trying to isolate her (inclusiveness had after all been the name of the European game since the Congress of Vienna). But a large majority felt that the danger of an ever more hegemonic Reich ruled that option out: the only way a balance could be maintained was by strengthening the Franco-Russian alliance and the Anglo-French Entente as a counterweight to the German-Austrian alliance. This was very much the view of Raymond Poincaré, president of the Republic since 1913 – a fateful turning point:² until then the alliance systems had a braking effect in a crisis, with less directly involved partners calming down their more militant Allies, as the Russians did with the French in 1905, the French with the Russians in 1908, and the Germans with the Austrians in 1912 and 1913. With the sharp increase of tension after 1913, however, the priority became to keep alliances functioning, and supporting an ally to the hilt became the

order of the day – witness the July 1914 crisis. As a result, French Grand strategy in the last years before 1914, while continuing to assume a basically defensive or “deterrent” posture against an ever more powerful Germany) had become much more offensive both at the diplomatic level (involving full support for the Russian ally and extensive aims if war should come) and, quite logically, at the strategic level, as we shall see.

To come to the heart of my topic: the system of political-military relations evolved during the war. Joffre was a decidedly republican commander-in-chief – he would not have been chosen if he had not been so – who fully respected the government’s prerogatives in matters of political guidance. A well-known instance is the meeting, on 9 January 1912 of the Conseil supérieur de la Défense nationale, the highest military-political body, that included the president of the Republic, the prime minister, the ministers for War and Foreign affairs, and Joffre. Joffre asked to be fully informed about the current status of French alliances, and, quite specifically, about Belgian neutrality in terms of international law. He asked to be authorised in case of war to march through Belgium, which was much more suitable than Lorraine for a broad offensive. The political authorities demurred, however, insisting that that would cost France the support of Great Britain (because of the 1839 guarantee treaty). One could argue, in fact, that Paris won the First World War on that day.

It should be noted, however, that while initially Joffre, as chief of staff and designated commander-in-chief, recognised that the overall direction of the war was a matter for the government, he was adamant that operational planning was strictly a matter for the military. Indeed, this went so far that at the beginning of the war Joffre refused to inform the government about the events at the front, contenting himself with asking them to leave Paris for Bordeaux, the usual destination of French governments in distress. When it became evident, contrary to initial expectations, that the war would be a long one, contrary to initial expectations, the politicians regained a modicum of control. But the full strategic freedom of action of the general staff did not disappear until 1916, when the bloody battles of Verdun and the Somme and the growing dissatisfaction of government and parliament about military secrecy and obfuscation by the high command moved Briand, prime minister since October 1915, to reorganise and streamline the French war effort all along the line. The high command was reorganised on 13 December

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1916. Henceforward Joffre and his successor Nivelle met the president, the prime minister and the ministers for War and Foreign affairs regularly at the meetings of the newly formed War Committee, where political-strategic but also strictly strategic matters were discussed.7

The Meaning of the “Plan XVII”: an Offensive Thrust Arising from Strategic and Military Considerations, or a Politically Motivated War Plan to Achieve Ambitious War Aims?

Was the famous “Plan XVII”, adopted in 1912 and envisaging a speedy offensive against Germany, solely the result of strategic and tactical considerations? Or did the French general staff also have ambitious political and territorial war aims in mind, aiming ultimately at destroying Germany’s hegemony in Europe? That there was general agreement between Paris and St. Petersburg in the event of war to eliminate Germany as a dominant power, if war did come, through a short offensive war, seems according to recent research quite plausible.8 This does not mean that France and Russia deliberately provoked a war; merely that, if it came to war, they intended to solve the German problem once and for all.

Already the Franco-Russian alliance, formed in 1893 with the strictly defensive aim of the “maintenance of peace”, had taken another direction in 1899 when foreign minister Delcassé widened its scope to a more far-reaching “maintenance of the balance between European forces”. For both countries this new objective was designed to take into account the eventual disintegration of Austria-Hungary and to prevent Germany from absorbing the German-speaking part of the Danube Monarchy and to expand towards the Balkans. In fact, Delcassé believed, (like many of his compatriots) that if Germany were to expand with the fall of the Dual Monarchy, then France would be entitled to recover Alsace-Lorraine in the name of “European Balance”.9

In the last years of peace the Franco-Russian alliance was steadily strengthened. Raymond Poincaré, prime minister in 1912 and president of the Republic the next year, was convinced war might soon break out, and that anyway a reinforced Alliance was the only way to deter Germany and Austria. Despite vociferous opposition the Three Years military service law was voted in 1913, both to reinforce the French Army if war broke out and in order to enhance France’s credibility with the Russians.10 It was also in order to reinforce the Alliance that Delcassé was sent

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7 For instance one may quote the February 6, 1917 sitting of the War Committee: see Raymond Poincaré: L’année trouble. Paris 1932, p. 59.
8 See Schmidt: Frankreichs Außenpolitik (see note 3); McMeekin: Russian Origins (see note 3), pp. 46–58.
by Poincaré as ambassador to St. Petersburg, in the course of which mission he also discussed with foreign minister Sazonov the peace conditions to be imposed to Germany after an eventual war.¹¹

As early as 1911 the new chief of staff, general Joffre, devised a new plan for the event of war, “Plan XVII”, which came into force in 1912. It was actually a mobilisation and concentration plan for the start of war, not really an operational plan, but its thrust was evident, and proceeded seamlessly from concentration to the first phase of the campaign in a way which proved that everything had been thought out in advance. There were to be two offensive thrusts, one towards Alsace, and the main one towards Lorraine, the centre of the German front. The strategic concept was one of a quick decisive victory, crushing the German centre, along the “Austerlitz paradigm” dear to the heart of French strategists since Napoleon. It is worth stressing that the significant word “decisive” occurred frequently in Joffre’s plans and orders at the time and expressly alluded to the “final crushing of the foe”. Of course the offensive concept was partly a reflection of the current systematic “offensive dogma” of the French military.¹² However, these ambitious plans¹³ had also much to do with the Russian alliance and the wish, if war were to come, to crush Germany in order to reorganise Europe – as is evident from the content of Franco-Russian staff talks in 1911, 1912 and 1913.¹⁴ We know that on 23 July, during their visit to St. Petersburg, just before the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July, Poincaré told the Russians to remain firm. They feared that, if the Russian government were to let the Serbs down, the Central Powers would reinforce their position in both the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire; and against the background of the victory of the Left, less favourably inclined to the Alliance, in the recent French elections, they feared for the survival of the Alliance if Paris and St. Petersburg did not stand together in the crisis. Only firmness, in Poincaré’s view, could deter the Central Powers from declaring war; and if war came nevertheless, France had to support Russia, lest she find herself isolated facing a Reich that had beaten Russia and dominated the Continent. It should be added that most contemporaries had little idea of the kind of war that was impending and assumed that after a short campaign a new European order would be arranged around the negotiating table.

¹³ This point was made already by Contamine: Victoire (see note 6). See Dimitri Queloz: De la manœuvre napoléonienne à l’offensive à outrance. La tactique générale de l’Armée française de 1871 à 1914. Paris 2009.
As Early as September 1914 Paris Decided to Seek a Complete Victory, not a Negotiated Peace. War Was Waged Accordingly and Government and High Command Marched in Step

Shortly after the Marne victory (6 September) the Russians, fearful that the French might content themselves with pushing the Germans back and liberating Alsace-Lorraine, asked Paris about its intentions, adding that, for their part, they indeed intended to “create in Europe a situation which would ensure world peace for many years”. The French replied on 20 September that the liberation of occupied territory and Alsace-Lorraine would not be enough to end the war, and that they were as determined as the Russians to “put an end to the hegemony of Prussian militarism”. That expression, coated with a veneer of republican ideology, was proclaimed publicly on 22 December; and although it was vague, it was, in fact, very significant. Indeed, this exchange with Petrograd demonstrated that almost immediately, if not beforehand, the central war aim was clearly to defeat Germany completely and to reconstruct Europe.15

Accordingly, from the Marne victory in September 1914 until the Nivelle offensive in April 1917, the French high command tried, despite German material superiority and despite many costly setbacks, to achieve a “break-through” by adopting a largely offensive strategy in harmony with France’s ambitious political, territorial and economic war aims. As early as the autumn of 1914 and throughout 1915, despite the fact that the several offensives ordered by Joffre had failed, the French went on developing an impressive set of war aims against Germany.16 The recovery of Alsace-Lorraine, was, of course, taken for granted, but there was talk in many quarters in Paris of establishing French control of Luxembourg and separating the Saar and Rhineland from the Reich. Those territories would perhaps, but not necessarily, be annexed, but they would at the very least be subjected to French strategic, political and economic control.

Between September and November 1914 the Russians, including the emperor himself, repeatedly told the French that they could establish their new frontier anywhere they wished between the pre-war border and the Rhine, while the French endorsed similar Russian aims in the East. In 1915 the French thinking was concentrated on the Saar region, whose coal production would be most useful once Lorraine with its steel works had been restored to France. Luxembourg too, with its important heavy industry – in 1913 its steel production amounted to 50% of that of France – began to attract a good deal of attention. Nor did the creation of a new European international system based on the dismemberment of the Bismarckian Reich escape consideration. The Russians let the French know very early that they wanted to take the imperial title away from the House of Hohenzollern and to restore Hanover as an independent Kingdom. The French gov-

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16 Joffre: Mémoires (see note 5), vol. 1, pp. 51–94.
ernment did not at that stage commit itself beyond vague if ominous talk of “ending the hegemony of Prussian militarism”, but the language of many Paris press articles (passed by the censor) was already very explicit.17

1915 and the Near Eastern Conundrum

Close correlation between strategy and war aims was much less in evidence in the Near East. Joffre was against both the Gallipoli landing in the spring of 1915, and that at Salonika in the autumn. Nothing should be allowed to distract attention from the main, Franco-German, front. For him, unlike the British government, with their grandiose outflanking strategic thrusts, the drawing of German forces away from the main battlefield, was the only benefit that a peripheral strategy could conceivably offer. Not that the French did not have any war aims in the region. But they were divided over the issue, and did not have the means to cover everything anyway. Some in the government agreed with Joffre that the priority was on the North-Eastern front, others supported by influential circles, advocated an ambitious policy for historical, religious and economic motives eventually embodied in the Sykes-Picot agreements of February 1916, promising France Lebanon, part of Syria and a zone of influence in the North of Iraq (including the Mosul region). When in 1917 Great Britain reneged on those agreements, however, France, with only one regiment in the whole theatre against one million British soldiers, was in no position to do anything.19

On might note here a quite modern feature of the relationship between strategy and war aims, viz. the special staff for operations outside France (Théâtres d'Opérations Extérieures, TOE), which was distinct from, although collocated with, the general staff proper. It had been established later in the war for the Gallipoli and Salonika expeditions, with reserve staff officers, who did not come from the regular army but from all sectors of French élites, who thought “out of the box” and did not rely solely on the famed “solution de l’Ecole de Guerre”. They were particularly innovative in bolstering French post-war influence in the region by using the war-time presence of French forces not only at the political and military level (the antecedent of the post-war French alliances in the region) but also in the economic field. One good instance is oil: the path for the post-war expansion of French companies in Romanian oil had already been prepared during the war by officers of the TOE, who were in civilian life active in the oil business.20

18 Joffre: Mémoires (see note 5), vol. 1, pp. 95–140.
In Search of a Decisive Victory to Achieve Maximum War Aims: The Somme and Nivelle Offensives of July 1916 and April 1917

Briand, who in October 1915 replaced Viviani as head of the government, was a far more forceful war leader than his predecessor. He pleaded for unity of purpose and convergence of action among Allies, and in November/December 1915 was instrumental in creating both an Allied military and an Allied political council. At the military council meeting in Chantilly in December it was decided to take the offensive simultaneously on all fronts (in the Anglo-French case, this was eventually to become the Somme offensive, which was delayed by the battle for Verdun until 1 July, 1916). Briand further helped to cajole Romania into entering the war on 28 August, with a view to compounding the problems of the Central Powers by getting the Salonika front moving at last.

It is not surprising that, with the perspective of these hopefully decisive strategic moves, the war aims question came back to the fore. After the defensive victory at Verdun in June 1916, and the promising beginning of the Somme offensive in July, a number of French diplomats in neutral capitals noted the onset of a real political “disarray” in Germany. On 12 August President Poincaré asked Joffre to prepare terms for an eventual armistice. This started a process which eventually embraced all France’s war aims, with studies at government and general staff level leading to a very important meeting of the principal ministers with Poincaré on 7 October. After this French war aims were put in writing, with approval of the Cabinet, in a letter of 12 January 1917 to Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London.

Alsace-Lorraine was, of course, to be recovered, but within its borders of 1790 (thus including a large part of the Saar province), not those of 1815. Owing to differences within the government no conclusion was reached as yet over the three possible solutions for the Rhineland question (outright annexation, permanent military occupation with the region remaining part of the Reich, and the establishment of one or two separate states closely linked to France); but Paris would demand from the Allies full freedom to decide the issue at the end of the war. Beyond this, the possibility was mooted with the Russians of ultimately discussed of signing the final peace treaty with the individual German states, thus

disposing of the unitary Reich altogether. Meanwhile Luxemburg was attracting more and more attention, and extensive economic war aims were devised that included customs unions with Belgium and Italy and an inter-Allied control system for major raw materials after the war – all to the detriment of German economy and to the benefit of the French. Indeed, by tripling its steel capacity with the recovery of Lorraine and the annexation or control of the Saar region and Luxembourgh, France would become a major industrial power in Europe.

Exactly in these very months (October 1916–January 1917) the General Staff (under Joffre and later under Nivelle) was preparing, in full agreement with the political leadership, what was to be known in April 1917 as the “Nivelle Offensive”, which, coming after the blow delivered to Germany by the Battle of the Somme, was expressly designed to “seal the ruin of the Central Powers”. Several meetings of Joffre with the principal ministers and Poincaré ensured that all the necessary preparations were fully coordinated. Now, for the first time, the government was fully informed of the operational plan and contributed to it its implementation (through the reorganisation mentioned above). Nothing less than complete victory was contemplated.

The same went for the Allies: on the basis of a French general staff memorandum of 12 November 1916 (which had been sent to Poincaré and Briand) an Allied staff conference in Chantilly proclaimed on the 15th that the 1917 campaign would be “decisive”. Joffre’s successor, Nivelle, retained the projected offensive and its extensive aims, including not only the liberation of territories occupied by the Germans, but also the “control of enemy territories, possession of which is necessary to negotiate peace and achieve favourable terms”.

The chronology testifies not only to the close connection between the preparation of a “decisive” offensive and the setting up of ambitious war aims, but to the profound agreement between government and high command.

May to November 1917: Peace Feelers, More Prudent War Aims, and Their Strategic Implications

From April 1917 to May 1918, however, starting with the failure of the Nivelle offensive followed in June by numerous acts of indiscipline in the French Army

25 Ibid., p. 360.
29 Joffre: Mémoires (see note 5), vol. 2, pp. 346ff.
in June, the difficult military situation demanded a defensive strategy, flanked by a secret diplomatic approach to Vienna. During the summer and autumn 1917 a negotiated peace could no longer be ruled out, and French war aims were correspondingly reduced. Certainly, Alsace-Lorraine was to be recovered at all events, but outright annexations in the Rhineland were no longer seriously considered. Even so, there might be a permanent military occupation or the separation of some areas from the Reich; at any rate, all were agreed that, as a minimum, some sort of security guarantee for France in the region was absolutely necessary.

This scaling down converged with the views of the average soldier in the field, as recorded by the military censors who checked their mail: they deeply felt that they were engaged in a rightful, defensive war, and that Alsace-Lorraine should be restored to France. Beyond that, however, they wanted no annexations but a peace underpinned by some sort of international system of guarantees to prevent Germany’s challenging it in the future.31 After all, they realised, however dimly, that France was also fighting for a “Republican model”, as opposed to the “Prussian authoritarian militaristic system”.

In Paris, the same general orientation, if somewhat more sanguine, could be observed in the Assembly, in on the only occasion on which it was able express its views about war aims (the government usually prevented any discussion of the topic), after the publication of a number of secret Franco-Russian agreements by the provisional government in Petrograd. At the beginning of June 1917 the Assembly set up a “secret committee” and passed a resolution rejecting “all thought of conquest”, while reaffirming the need to bring down “Prussian militarism” and establish “lasting guarantees of peace”. The debates, too, showed that although the deputies renounced the idea of annexing the Rhineland, they wanted it under permanent occupation after the war, or even separated from the Reich.32

Paul Painlevé, a former education minister in the Briand Cabinet, war minister under Ribot from March to September 1917, then prime minister until November, was a particularly prudent exponent of an alternative policy and pushed the new, moderate, orientation even further. He no longer believed – particularly after the Russian revolution – in the possibility of a decisive victory, and decided to replace Nivelle, after the failure of his offensive, by Pétain, who was convinced that until the Americans appeared at the front in force and until the new armaments, particularly the tanks, could be produced in quantity, Allied strategy had to remain defensive.33

As for war aims, Painlevé abandoned many of the ambitious goals devised since 1914. For him there was only one noli me tangere, the return of Alsace-Lorraine.

(still within the 1790 borders, however, and including a big part of the Saar region). Beyond that everything would depend on how the war ended. In short, Painlevé rejected the idea of an all-out offensive followed by an imposed peace. For him, the only way was to seek a relative victory by combining a defensive strategy with a set of diplomatic manoeuvres, particularly in the direction of Vienna – either to entice Austria-Hungary into concluding a separate peace, or to persuade Berlin, by raising the spectre of isolation, to accept a general peace conference.

As regards the Dual Monarchy, a whole series of peace feelers went from Painlevé to Vienna which cannot be detailed here. The general idea was to offer the bait of a guarantee of Austria-Hungary’s survival; but the Monarchy would have to be reconstructed along federal lines, according a due share of influence to the Slavs, and thus ensuring that Vienna would lean more on Paris than on Berlin in future. Vienna should also support France over disarmament and security measures in the Rhineland, and reparations. Even so, Germany might be granted compensations, for perhaps in the French colonies. In short, Painlevé was proposing what he saw as a fair and comprehensive settlement, vastly diminishing the hegemonic position of Germany in Europe through a new balance quite favourable to France, but without tearing up the whole fabric of the Continent.

All these issues were discussed between Painlevé and Lloyd George and between Briand and von der Lancken, the chief of the German administration in occupied Belgium, in Boulogne on 25 September 1917. Two points are of interest for us here: in the first place, there was general agreement on the idea, which was being ventilated in many quarters, that peace might be easier to achieve if in return for concessions to the Allies in the West the Germans were allowed to compensate themselves at the expense of Russia. In the second, probably sensing that peace negotiations might be imminent, Painlevé lost no time in extracting from Lloyd George the undertaking (which London had so far stubbornly resisted) that there could be no peace without the restoration of Alsace-Lorraine to France – as Lloyd George, albeit hardly overjoyed, announced in public on 11 October.

Of course the fleeting moment when a negotiated peace seemed possible soon vanished again. On the one hand, the Germans managed to bring the Austrians into line, on the other, a coalition of conservatives and “jusqu’au boutistish” leaders London and Paris forced Lloyd George to abandon the idea of negotiations and drove Painlevé from office altogether.

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35 As the King of the Belgians told Poincaré, on September 22nd; see: Poincaré: Au service (see note 28), vol. 9, p. 293.
Meanwhile, however, Pétain, Nivelle’s defensive-minded successor as commander in chief, chosen by Painlevé after the failure of the April offensive had of course revised his strategy on the assumption that full victory was now very doubtful, that some sort of negotiated peace might come quickly, and that it might not be disastrous for France if both camps agreed to end to the war at the expense of defeated Russia.37 (Significantly, many of Painlevé’s peace overtures too had been made through the Deuxième Bureau of the General staff, in charge of evaluating the enemy and in control of the Secret Service). Of course Pétain, exactly like Painlevé, wanted to ensure that in any case France would achieve its minimal war aim: the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine; but the offensive plan for 1918 which he devised in October 1917 did not really aim at beating the Germans “decisively”, like earlier war plans (and as all the grand strategists of the Clausewitz-Foch school had preached). Its aim was simply to secure Alsace-Lorraine physically for France, come what may.38 Once again war aims and strategy were co-ordinated, but with far more modest ends in view.

November 1917 to July 1918: The Brest-Litovsk Armistice, the Impending German Onslaught and the End of the Peace Feelers

Clemenceau, prime minister from 17 November 1917, soon put an end to the peace feelers initiated by his predecessor, and vowed to make war and nothing but war. He refused to be specific in about French war aims, apart of course from Alsace-Lorraine, but in private he did not conceal his intention to work for the more favourable 1790 boundary, the annexation of the Saar, and at the very least the permanent occupation of the Rhineland. However, he also had to take President Wilson’s Fourteen Points into account, unenthusiastic as he was about them; and he rightly suspected that the Americans and the British would be difficult as regards French war aims.39

As his war aims were more extensive than those of his predecessor, it was not surprising that he refused to support Pétain’s strategic plan for 1918, which had been strictly defensive in expectation of the German offensive which would evidently follow the transfer dozens of German divisions from the Eastern to the Western front. (Pétain had planned to regain the initiative in 1919, when there would be enough American forces in France; but that would have meant that the war would become even more Anglo-American than it was already, and that France would have even less say about peace terms.40) Clemenceau, therefore, pronounced in favour of Foch (Allied commander-in-chief since March 1918) and his plan to confront the enemy with counter-attacks, and, if the occasion arose, to

38 Ibid., pp. 122–137.
39 Soutou: La France et les Marches (see note 15), pp. 380f.
launch “a combined offensive with decisive aims”, even in 1918. This was exactly what was to occur with Foch’s offensives that started, after Ludendorff’s spring and summer offensives had run out of steam, on 18 July.

July 1918, the Big Push: Common Allied War Aims, or a Particular French Agenda?

For a time, even after the Germans began to retreat after the big Allied offensive of 18 July, the future looked uncertain. Pétain, commander in chief of French forces, and Foch, the Allied commander in chief, were divided as to the course to follow. Foch prepared a series of offensives along most of the front involving all the Allied forces but his aim at this stage was simply to push the Germans back as far as possible and to regain important railways and industrial assets – certainly not to achieve a decisive result already before the end of the year.

At the same time, however, the French general staff and Pétain had another idea: they wanted to launch a concentrated offensive in Lorraine. On the one hand, the German front was thinner there, and given the importance of Lorraine in terms of lines of communication, important strategic results could be expected. On the other hand, the idea was patently to conquer and to hold in French hands, independently of the Allies, territorial assets that would be particularly important for Paris in any forthcoming peace negotiations. Foch refused to agree to this (in complex discussions that need not be recounted here) until 5 November. As a result the Lorraine offensive – the plans had been basically completed on 10 October, but time was still needed to concentrate the necessary forces – was scheduled to begin on 14 November. The Armistice intervened three days before.

As for Clemenceau, although he did not usually hesitate to intervene forcefully in high command matters, reminding everyone of that he was (as not only president of the council but also war minister) the “constitutional chief of the Armies”, his role in this debate is hard to discern. It is difficult to believe that he did not understand the scope of the issues at stake. He was, however, trapped in a contradiction between French war aims (including those regarding the Rhineland) as they had developed since 1914, which he did not – pace his critics – abandon, and the hard fact that if France was to enjoy American and British support at the end of the war, she would have to abide, at least outwardly, by the Wilsonian agenda.

It could be said that Foch’s strategy was really an inter-Allied strategy, designed to facilitate a basic agreement with London and Washington at the conference table and after the war, while Pétain’s strategy was the more strictly “national” one, based

42 Pedroncini: Pétain (see note 37), p. 414.
43 Ibid., p. 422.
44 Ibid., pp. 423–427.
45 Soutou: La France et les Marches (see note 15), pp. 381–383.
on the conviction that a number of specific French war aims would not be readily accepted by the Allies unless the French themselves could create faits accomplis before the fighting ceased. Clemenceau was caught in a contradiction between his cardinal policy of keeping in line with the two other major liberal democracies, and his desire to achieve France’s national objectives. Here, perhaps, lay the roots of his less than decisive approach to strategy in the summer and autumn of 1918?

The Armistice Controversy: Insufficient Coordination between French Strategy and French War Aims?

The failure to start the Lorraine offensive was the subject of fierce debate at the time and later, as to whether the chance had been missed to achieve a decisive result, and whether, as many in Paris felt, the Armistice had been granted to Germany too soon. Did the acceptance of the 11 November mean the renunciation of former war aims? Was there a sudden disconnection between war aims and the conduct of the war? Or did the Armistice not rather connect with Clemenceau’s policy of achieving the most that could be achieved without breaking with the Allies – who would remain after all the main source of French security in the face of a Germany which would emerge from the war diminished, but in no way eliminated from the European scene as many had hoped in 1914 and later. Much has also been made of a dispute between Foch and Clemenceau at the time when the Armistice articles were being prepared: Foch wished the armistice agreement to either proclaim or refer to the annexation of the Rhineland to France, or at least the formation of a State separated from the Reich. Clemenceau demurred, objecting that that would have amounted to a confusion between military and political matters and that Foch, in charge of the Armistice as Allied commander in chief, should have no say in drafting peace terms anyway. Some have claimed that here Clemenceau was renouncing any extensive war aims. This was not so; but he recognised all the same that France would have to bring the Allies, not only the Germans, to accept its views. He managed, at any rate, to extract from the Allies the condition that German forces should evacuate not only Belgium, the occupied territories, Alsace-Lorraine, but also the Left Bank of the Rhine, including the bridgeheads on the Right Bank. He understood perfectly well what could be later achieved from that staging ground. As he told Foch: “Peace guaranties must find anchor points in the Armistice.” The British, for their part, were all too well aware of the ulterior motives of the French, and feared, that once they were ensconced on the Left Bank, they would be very difficult to dislodge.

48 Renouvin: L’armistice (see note 46), pp. 195ff.
For the present, even Foch was convinced that the occupation of the Left Bank and of the bridgeheads made it impossible for Berlin to resume hostilities in the immediate future; and that the Allied powers could therefore devise peace terms at their ease. Nor were Clemenceau’s terms those of a peace of renunciation. True, the Reich would not be divided after all: Clemenceau was convinced, unlike many of his countrymen, that German unity was not artificial; but that it could nevertheless with the help of the USA, and UK and the new independent States in Central Europe, be controlled in an international system along Wilsonian lines. This would not preclude either a broad French influence over the Saar and Rhine regions and Luxembourg and German economy and a strictly limited German military; or even French support for independence movements that might develop in the Rhineland and in Bavaria.

In short, Clemenceau, although he had not supported Foch’s demand to include the annexation of the Left Bank in the Armistice, remained active and retained his ulterior motives. On 16 February 1919 he assured the Senate that the Rhineland would be separated from the Reich, and would form an autonomous State under French occupation and linked to France through a customs union: “In other words, we shall occupy until the region will be ready to join France.”

He also permitted the French military and secret service to support Rhineland autonomists seeking separation from Prussia and the transformation of the Reich into a loose confederation. The Dorten coup of May 1919 enjoyed secret but effective support from the French authorities, and even from Clemenceau himself, who desisted only because of Wilson’s strong reaction. At the same time Clemenceau supported the attempt of the French High Commissar for the Rhine territories, Tirard, to promote the French democratic model as a sort of magnet to influence the evolution of Germany as a whole in a more democratic direction. Hence, Clemenceau’s Rhineland policy was multi-faceted advancing French “republican” political and cultural influence in Germany as a whole; and, if the inhabitants of the Rhineland wished to go in that direction promoting a large degree of autonomy from Berlin, and, eventually, closer and closer links to France. By such devices, Clemenceau could reconcile his genuine liberalism and dislike of annexations with his obsession about buttressing France’s security.

Without entering into the complex negotiations over the Peace treaty, it is worth noting that many of its provisions were linked to complex time-tables: the final status of the Saar was to be resolved by a plebiscite in 1935; the occupation of the Rhineland, linked to the payment of reparations, would last 15 years or more. The French were convinced that by 1935 the inhabitants of the Saar would

come to appreciate the superior French social system and vote for France. As for the Rhineland, Clemenceau himself was convinced that Germany could never pay the reparations and that France would stay on the Rhine indefinitely. But for Clemenceau this rather disingenuous system of time-tables at least allowed him to paper over his differences with the Allies, whose support, as he fully recognised, was so vital to French security.

The elimination of Germany as a unified national State remained a long term aspiration in influential circles in France, but Clemenceau never adhered to it, he was convinced that German unity was both strong and a natural development. But even there his attitude was more complex than is often assumed. Between complete dissolution and a fully centralised Reich many possibilities could be envisioned, such as some sort of loose confederation or at least “federalism”, in the sense of greater autonomy from Berlin. Clemenceau, among others, believed that such an evolution might be appropriate not only for the Rhineland, but for Bavaria. For all these short-term aims and long-term ulterior motives a lengthy period of occupation of the Left Bank, as envisaged by the Armistice and later the Treaty of Versailles was, as things stood, about the best that Paris could hope for; and there was perhaps more harmony after all between French strategy and French war aims than has usually been assumed.

Conclusions

The French government, the French Army and a significant body of public opinion were in agreement, throughout the entire war, on France’s minimal war aims – the “de-annexion” of Alsace-Lorraine; and even if we consider that real military-political coordination was not achieved until the end of 1916, already before that date France enjoyed better coordination than, for instance Germany (witness the dissension over Belgium in the internal German debate about war aims). In France, generally speaking, the interplay between strategy and the definition of war aims, was productive, with two exceptions: the Near East (where French interests were not much in evidence, and French military power on the spot was

overshadowed by the British); and 1918, when a divergence arose between what might be termed French national war aims supported by a French national strategy and an Allied strategy, to which French war aims had to be adjusted if they were to be accepted by the Allies.