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## **What does France want ?**

### **French goals regarding foreign policy and economics**

Summary of Hans Stark's speech in Santiago de Compostela, September 25th 2004

France is one of the few European countries which clearly set up and pursue their own goals regarding foreign policy. These goals may sometimes be in contradiction with the interests of France's main European and transatlantic partners but they respond to the three wishes of France : ensure independence, make itself heard on the national scene and actively contribute to the emergence of a multipolar world and of a global security architecture, dominated by the U.N. system.

These objectives are part of a will of diplomatic relaunch, after years of paralysis due to the uneasy cohabitation of socialists and conservatives between 1993 and 1995 first and again between 1997 and 2002. France is now systematically asserting its presence in every big international topic and hardly hides its will to be a leader in the European Union, together with Germany. Should it be about the Iraq question, the peace process in Near-East, African crises or deepening of European integration, France is willing to have influence on the international debate and decision-making process, thanks to its status of permanent member of the Security Council, and of « big country » and founding country of the European Union.

However, these objectives regularly and more and more often clash with the interests of France's main partners. The political and economic means of France are moreover limited. With nearly 60 million inhabitants, France is only a middle power and is, like all the countries of the European Union, confronted to unavoidable declining demography. Hence its will to turn the European Union (more than 350 million people) into a political actor, which would be able to take up the challenge of the American superpower. But for the vast majority of Europeans, especially in the East, the partnership with the United States remains essential. France cannot take on the leadership of the Union (which means Paris would have to elaborate positions on which all member states could agree) and at the same time use the European Union as a

counterbalancing power to the United-States (an idea more or less rejected by all the other member states in the Union).

The French “exception” and the sense of identity of its diplomacy may lead France into a stalemate, marginalize it in the European Union and deprive it from the leadership it would like to take on. France is well aware of this risk and will have to revive the partnership with Great-Britain and the United-States, especially if they once again address the United Nations to solve big actual issues, starting with the Iraq crisis and the peace process in the Near-East.

France cannot neglect the fact that its voters are much more interested in the economic and social problems of their own country than in international politics. In France like elsewhere, the economic situation prevails. And it is worrying. Economic growth is negative, unemployment is rising again and the government is facing simmering social discontent because of the reforms it has enforced in the field of social security and pension. France also more or less openly refuses to abide by the European instructions of budgetary consolidation, which are nonetheless mandatory because of the Stability Pact of the Economic and Monetary Union. France has both hands tied. It cannot reduce social expenses, relaunch growth and raise military expenses at the same time. This would be a real squaring of the circle, which would damage the credibility and the stability of the Euro. The popularity of the government would also collapse. The French budgetary effort for defense may now be 2% of the BIP (instead of 1.8%) after the adoption of the military program bill of law (2003-2008), but France is not allowed to go beyond this limit: it is indeed limited by the internal economic crisis and the Stability Pact of the E.U.. The capacities of France for influencing the international debate and militarily intervening in crisis regions do exist but they are limited.