The Choice for a Minilateral Europe: A Historical Sociology of Defence-Industrial Capitalism

Samuel B. H. Faure
Sciences Po Saint-Germain

Abstract: In order to acquire a new military transport aircraft in the 2000s, why did France decide to choose European minilateralism (A400M) rather than the alternative of Franco-American bilateralism (C-17 and C-130)? A “configurational” argument with regard to this decision is developed, using an approach that looks at the historical sociology of a political economy in arms procurement in Europe, derived from the work of Norbert Elias. This argument explains France’s choice of a minilateral Europe as resulting from the effect of social interdependence that is conceptualised by the notion of “configuration”. Establishing the positions adopted by French state and industrial actors required two years of fieldwork (2012–2014). A total of 105 semi-structured interviews were conducted with French actors (political, military, administrative, and industrial) who took part in the negotiations from the mid-1970 to the early 2000s. Beyond presenting this data, this article contributes to the development of international political sociology by making the concept of configuration operational.

Keywords: A400M, configuration, historical sociology, political economy, minilateralism, Europe

Introduction

To produce and acquire arms such as tanks, cruise missiles, fighter jets or frigates, European states like Poland, Italy, Germany or France have three options at their disposal: unilaterally, bilaterally, and “minilaterally” (Faure 2019a, 2019b). According to one recent report, 80% of their arms acquisitions are still the result of the absence of international co-operation (de La Brosse 2017). This was the case with France when the state decided, in the 1980s, to buy the French Rafale fighter aircraft rather than the European Typhoon (deVore, Weiss 2014). At the same time, European states make use of bilateral collaboration, as in the case of the Franco-German Tiger helicopter programme (Krotz 2011), and Franco-British Lancaster House Agreement (Pannier 2016; Faure, 2019c). They also take part in minilateral co-operation, which brings together more than two states but still involves a restricted number (Morel, Richter, 2019). This option of minilateralism is increasingly valued and adopted by states in Europe. This is the case with the Transatlantic minilateralism of the F-35
fighter aircraft programme, which brings together the United States, Canada, and also Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Turkey and the United Kingdom (Vucetic Nossal 2013; Hoeffler, Mérand 2015).

It is also the case for the European ‘minilateralism’ of the A400M military transport aircraft programme (Joana, Smith 2006; Mawdsley 2013), which constitutes another variety of differentiated European integration beyond the European Union (EU) (Faure, Lebrou, 2019). In 2003, seven European states took part in the programme: Germany, Belgium, Spain, France, Luxembourg, Turkey, and the United Kingdom. These states have implemented the A400M programme within an ad hoc European organisation that was distinct from the EU: the Organisation for Joint Armament Co-operation (OCCAR) (Mawdsley 2004; Mörth, Britz 2004). OCCAR signed, on behalf of these seven states, a contract for the supply of 180 aircraft with Airbus Military Sociedad Limitada (AMSL), the military subsidiary of the European consortium European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company (EADS), which became the industrial prime contractor on the A400M programme.

Valued at €28bn, the A400M is one of the costliest arms programmes in which European states have taken part since the end of World War II (Faure 2016). The European states’ decision in favour of the A400M seems counter-intuitive. They decided to develop a military transport aircraft with all the political, economic, and technological costs the project would involve, when they could have bought American C-17 and C-130 aircraft, which were cheaper and available immediately. This dilemma between the European A400M and the American C-17 and C-130 aircraft is studied by looking at the decisional positions adopted by France. Why did France decide to choose European minilateralism (A400M) rather than the decisional alternative of Franco-American bilateralism (C-17 and C-130)?

A “configurational” argument with regard to this decision is developed, using an approach that looks at the historical sociology of a political economy in arms procurement in Europe, derived from the work of Norbert Elias (Devin 1995; Linklater 2004; Delmotte 2015). This argument explains France’s choice of a minilateral Europe as resulting from the effect of social interdependence that is conceptualised by the notion of “configuration” (Elias 1975, 1991, 1993) – defined as a “historical dynamic” (Elias 1975: 115) and a “chain of interdependence” (Elias 1993a: 163–177; 1993b: 130–1). A double “configurational” dynamic explains the acquisition of the A400M by the French state. At the national level, the decision was favoured by the progressive increase in the autonomy of companies in the military aeronautics sector in relation to the state (a weakening of the interdependence of French state and industrial actors). At the international level, the decision was shaped by relations of closer interdependence between France and European states than between France and the United States. Indeed, it strengthened interdependence between French and other European stakeholders. In other words, France’s choice of a minilateral Europe is driven by “disembedded” relations between French state and defence industry, and at the same time by a “Europeanisation” of interstate relations.

Establishing the decisional positions adopted by French state and industrial actors required two years of fieldwork (2012-2014). A total of 105 semi-structured interviews were conducted with French actors (political, military, administrative, and industrial) who took part in the negotiations from the mid-1970 to the early 2000s.