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

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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: unilateralism, bilateralism, and “minilateralism” (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 2015), 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; Mörh, 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.
Beyond the validity of the configurational argument in explaining France’s choice of minilateral Europe, this article complements the study of differentiated European integration beyond the EU (Leuffen, Rittberger, Schimmelfennig, 2012; Fabbrini, Schmidt, 2019). Moreover, it contributes in two areas to the development of a political sociology of European and international politics (Mérand 2008; Adler-Nissen 2013; Faure 2018) and of political economy (Fligstein, 2008; Jullien, Smith, 2008; Bonelli, Jeanpierre, 2017; Faure, Joltreau, Smith, 2019a). We make the concept of configuration operational through: 1) the conceptual proposition, which aims to pinpoint the institutional interstices between the state, industry, and the international which the decision was arrived at by the actors, is broadened; 2) the development of relations of interdependence maintained by government and industrial actors, French and European, over the long term is explained. Thus, the analysis attempts to confer some sociological and historical depth on the concept of “interdependence” (Delmotte 2007: 90; see also Hoeffler’s article in this issue).

The article has two parts: the first develops a historical sociology of a political economy in arms procurement, with the aim of contributing to the literature on differentiated integration in Europe; the second presents the results of the research carried out to explain the decision taken by France to acquire the European A400M.

The Historical Sociology of Political Economies of Arms Procurement

*How ideas, interests, and institutions produce a minilateral Europe*

To develop understandings of the state’s choice of a minilateral Europe, this section discusses the constructivist, the liberal intergovernmentalist and the rational choice neo-institutionalist explanations.

First of all, Joana and Smith (2004a, 2004b, 2006) analyse the acquisition of the A400M by formulating an argument that lies at the intersection of constructivism and public policy analysis. On the basis of fieldwork (25 semi-structured interviews), Joana and Smith reveal that government and industrial actors make strategic use of the ambiguous idea of the “commercial approach” that is characteristic of the A400M programme. The commercial approach is a way of procuring arms that aims to transfer to the military sector the economic logic that operates in the commercial field: marginalise users’ expectations (the size of the aircraft’s hold) and limit the demands of industry (choice of engine) in order to standardise the product with the aim of cutting costs. The commercial approach is a “rallying call” (“bannière mobilisatrice”) (Joana, Smith 2004a: 138–9). Some would call it “constructive ambiguity” (Jegen, Mérand 2014), which explains the implementation of interstate collaboration despite diverging national interests: “Over several months, the vagueness surrounding the ‘commercial approach’ will ensure its success […] thus it will bring together actors with very different motivations, each of whom gives it a specific meaning” (Joana, Smith 2004b: 121).

Moreover, Joana and Smith reveal the differentiated logic of this European collaboration by articulating bilateralism and European minilateralism.
demonstrate that instances of Franco-German bilateral collaboration during the 1980s and early 1990s, and of Franco-British collaboration from the mid-1990s, were a structuring condition at the emergence of minilateral Europe. This research interprets, in a convincing manner, the decision taken by France in favour of the acquisition of the A400M, but it does not introduce explicative variables. Why did France prefer European minilateralism over Franco-American bilateralism, and the European A400M over the American C-17 and C-130?

In contrast, according to liberal intergovernmentalism, the state – which is represented by the Chief Executive and the officers of the Ministry of Defence (Moravcsik 1993) – chose minilateral Europe when this option was supported by the national defence industry (Moravcsik 1991; Schilde 2017). This was the case, during the 1980s, with the companies Messerschmitt-Bölkow-Blohm (MBB) and British Aerospace (BAe), which were in favour of the Eurofighter Typhoon programme, in which Germany, the United Kingdom, and Italy were collaborating (Moravcsik 1993).

However, this argument is refuted in the case of the acquisition of the A400M by France. On the one hand, the series of mergers and acquisitions which ended with the creation of EADS was less strongly supported by the prime contractors of the aeronautics sector, both military (Aérospatiale) and civilian (Airbus Industrie), than by the socialist government of Lionel Jospin (Faure 2016). The French state thus engaged in “reverse lobbying” (Woll 2008) and consequently could not be reduced to a “transmission belt” used by industrial actors – or indeed by national ones (Moravcsik 1997: 518). On the other hand, liberal intergovernmentalism overestimates the institutional distinction between the state and industry, by conceptualising them as two strictly distinct entities. Yet, until the mid-1990s, all French industrial actors that had come from the military aeronautics sector were, with the exception of Dassault Aviation, publicly owned enterprises (Aérospatiale, Snecma, Thomson-CSF). These were constituent agencies of the state.

For its part, the rational choice neo-institutionalist argument, derived from the Soskician side of the varieties of capitalism school, documents the movement of actors, administrative (armaments engineers) and military (air force officers), from the state to industry and vice versa (deVore, Weiss 2014). French state and industrial actors in the arms sector constitute a “technocratic ‘engineering’ culture” (deVore, Weiss 2014: 523), a concept which echoes that of the “programmatic actors” (Genieys, Michel 2006; Béraud-Sudreau 2014). By virtue of their being moulded within the same grandes écoles [France’s elite higher education establishments], their belonging to the large “bodies” [“grands corps”] of the state, and their practice of switching from the state to the private sector [“pantouflage”], “company directors and political decision-makers possess an inherent ability to co-ordinate their activities and influence each other” (deVore, Weiss 2014: 507).

This “statist” structure of France’s political economy generates “dirigiste” regulations, that is, non-market-oriented rules decreed by the state (deVore, Weiss 2014: 507). The arms procurement agency (DGA) of the defence ministry, which maintains close links with military aeronautics companies, is a result of this statist political economy. Indeed, not only does the state occupy a strategic position for the regulation of the defence industry, but defence companies are able to play a part in decisions through the informal network of armaments engineers that connects them to the DGA.
Although the rational choice neo-institutionalist argument is effective in explaining the decisions taken by the state that favour “made in France”, it does not explain France’s choice of minilateral Europe. The different industrial branches of military aeronautics (fighter aircraft, transport aircraft, military helicopters, drones, and so on) have been structured by the same “dirigiste” institutions. Yet France has simultaneously opted for self-sufficiency by producing first the Mirage fighter aircraft and then the Rafale, and opted for European co-operation by buying the Transall transport aircraft, the Lynx transport helicopter, and the Jaguar fighter aircraft.

What is more, for reasons of parsimony this argument restricts the state, to the DGA, that is, to administrative actors. Incidentally, the networks of actors described are located exclusively at the bureaucratic level, and are made up of the armaments engineers working for the DGA or in the industry. Neither the political nor the military actors are taken seriously. And yet, the idea that administrative actors are sufficiently independent of political and military authority to take over the decision-making is questionable in the case of France (Cohen, 1994; Irondelle, 2011). The networks that are located at the political level and which bring together the president, the defence minister, and the chief of armed forces, as well as the CEOs of the main French and European arms companies are not taken into consideration.

Finally, from this angle political economy is thought of as being stable over time: France represented, represents, and will continue to represent a “statist” form of economic regulation. This explicative model, which emphasises the continuity of the institutional trajectory of France’s political economy, is effective for understanding the persistence of the “dirigiste” logic of French capitalism (Ansaloni, Smith 2018). However, it is not suitable for explaining the double transition to a “market” logic (Muller 1989) and to a “rise towards Europe” (Britz 2010; Hoeffler 2013) embodied by, amongst others, the A400M programme.

Configuration: from a metaphor to a concept

How can one reveal the coalitions of actors that circulate from the state to industry in a way that is more exhaustive than that proposed by the rational choice neo-institutionalists, while at the same time explaining the development over time of the French political economy of military transport aircraft? Here the concept of configuration, as defined by Norbert Elias in his historical sociology approach, will be brought into play, but differently from the sense in which the term is commonly used in public policy analysis, political economy, and international relations, i.e. as a simple descriptor of the heterogeneous collections of actors that participate in the formulation of the state’s decision (Joana, Smith 2006: 72; Genieys, Michel, 2006: 125; DeVore, Weiss, 2014: 522).

First of all, when used as a concept, the term configuration pinpoints a “[…] progressive and not programmed social process” (Elias 1975: 115). This historical dynamic, whether it reproduces itself or transforms itself, is difficult to predict: “The interpenetration of the actions taken by thousands of interdependent individuals is such that none of them, and no group – no matter how powerful – is in a position to determine how things turn out” (Elias 1993a: 180). In the case of the France’s acquisition of the A400M, neither the president, nor the defence ministry, any more than the chief of the air force or the CEO of EADS determined, alone, the decisional
process in favour of minilateral Europe. This tendency is not in contradiction with the fact that certain actors – formerly the king, today the president or the defence ministry – enjoy their own autonomy, which enables them to have a determining effect on the formulation of the decision (Iordonelle 2011). In the case of the genesis of the French state, it was unlikely that the Capetian dynasty would prevail over the other great warrior families, but there is little doubt that one of them achieved a pre-eminent position (Elias 1975: 43). In the case of the France’s acquisition of the A400M, it was likely that France would acquire a new military transport aircraft during the 2000s, but the decisional option preferred by the government was unexpected.

Second, the concept of configuration, also described as a “chain of interdependence”, is defined by a relational hierarchy or structure (Elias 1993a: 163–177; 1993b: 130–1). The structure of a configuration reflects the asymmetrical arrangement of the relations of interdependence between actors that have unequal resources at their disposal and which positions itself in favour of a decisional option (the A400M or the C-17 and C-130). The social interdependence that constitutes a configuration is defined as “ […] all the relations of reciprocal dependence that exist and can exist between individuals or groups of individuals” (Delmotte 2007: 90). In fact, the unit of analysis of a configurational approach is the social relation. According to Elias, social interdependence is the causal mechanism that explains the formulation of the state’s decision. Indeed, if the dynamic of a configuration is uncontrolled, blind, and not planned, the fact remains that it is “[…] ‘ordered’ and obeys a ‘logic’: that of social interdependence” (Elias 1975: 78). The variable institutional autonomy that state and industrial actors have at their disposal to shape the decisional process in favour of minilateral Europe (A400M) or bilateral Franco-American collaboration (C-17 and C-130) depends on the structure of a configuration.

Finally, a chain of interdependence is made up of a collection of “units” or “links”, each of which represents an individual (Alain Richard, France’s defence minister from 1997 to 2002) or a group of individuals (the chief of the air force). A “unit” does not exist without a connection to other “units”. For Elias, the actor is an “homines aperti”, that is an “open man” who is tangled up with other “open men” (Elias 1993a: 150; Delzescaux 2016: 71–4; Penna 2016: 361–6). In piecing together these relations of interdependence that bring together the actors in France’s military transport aircraft policy it is possible to explain France’s choice of a minilateral Europe.

This theoretical proposition goes against the liberal theory and rational choice neo-institutionalist theory, which both consider actors a priori as separate entities, as the model of the “homo clausus” (Elias 2013: 168), which imagines the actor as a “thinking statue” suggests (Elias 1998: 160–1, 165–6). To put it another way, it is not a matter of determining whether the state or industry is in charge in the decisional “cockpit” (deVore, Weiss 2014), insofar as they are considered to be fundamentally interconnected. Rather, it is a matter of revealing the configurational structures that shape France’s military transport aircraft policy, through its dynamics and its “links”. Therefore, the two explanatory contributions of the notion of configuration to conceptualising France’s political economy of military transport aircraft are as follows: 1) revealing the relationships of interdependence between the actors that are located in the institutional interstices of the state, of industry, and of the international
sphere, and who formulate the decision; 2) describing the evolution of these relationships of interdependence to explain France’s choice of a minilateral Europe.

**Configuration: from its definition to its operationalisation**

How are we to empirically reveal these configurations in order to explain how the state came to choose minilateral Europe (the A400M) rather than Franco-American bilateralism (the C-17 and C-130)?

In the foreword to *La Société de cour*, Elias (2008: LX; see also Joly 2017: 109) writes: “[…] sociological theories that cannot be verified by empirical sociological work are useless. They do not even deserve to be given the status of theories.” However, his methodological application is nowhere to be found in European studies or theories of international relations. Neither Devin (1995), nor Linklater (2011, 2017; see also Mennell 2017), who bring into play Elias’s concept of configuration, make use of it on the basis of a field survey. As for the work of Delmotte (2007, 2015) and Lacassagne (2012), they do not set such a goal because they fall within political theory. As Devin recalls (1995: 316 see also Heinich 2002: 93, 106), the response set out by Elias (1993b: 130) is fundamentally inductive. It is not a matter of imposing *a priori* the boundaries of a configuration, but of demonstrating *a posteriori* the force of the boundaries identified by a researcher in time and then in space.

On the one hand, reconstructing the dynamic of the configurations that underpins France’s military transport aircraft policy examines the definition of their boundaries in time. It is not a matter of looking for a historical start line, but an “order of filiation”: to explain configuration B, it is necessary to analyse configuration A, which preceded it (Elias 1993a: 200). However, to say that configuration B is derived from the preceding configuration A does not mean that B follows the dynamic of A “mechanically”: “[…] the state of configuration B is just one of the possible transformations of A” (Elias 1993a: 198). In the case of the acquisition of the A400M by France, the configuration that structured military transport aircraft policy after the Second World War was different from that observed after the Cold War. It is a question of revealing this “reconfiguration” in order to explain the decision taken by France in favour of minilateral Europe. Methodologically, this approach requires a historic process tracing analysis (devVore, Weiss 2014; Bennett, Checkel 2015).

On the other hand, the spatial boundaries of the configurations that shape France’s military transport aircraft policy have been set by testing two relational dimensions: between whom, and of what type, are the relations that make up a configuration?

First, four relational dyads empirically establish the relations of interdependence that bring together the “units” that make up a configuration. These are connections 1) between state actors (political, military, administrative), and 2) between state actors and industrial actors. These two dyads occur on two levels – or “planes” (Elias 1993a: 130) – of formulation of the decision: 3) the national level and 4) the international level. The inductive nature of this approach does not determine *a priori* a micro, meso, or macro level of analysis. According to the data obtained, it is a matter of going backwards and forwards between zooms (micro level), of doing a tracking shot (meso level) and a full shot (macro level).

Second, three indicators indicate the “ambivalence” of collaborative and concurrent relations as well as public and private relations (Elias 2008: 225): their
antiority, their proximity, and their conflictual nature. The degree of anteriority of relations of interdependence relates to their age, that is, to the length of a configuration over time. The degree of proximity of relations of interdependence reveals the relational distance between the actors, that is, the extent of a configuration in space. The degree of conflictual nature of relations of interdependence defines the level of competition between actors, that is, the internal dynamic of a configuration.

These three indicators make it possible to describe the two historical dynamics that constitute the configurations shaping France’s military transport aircraft policy over time: industry becoming autonomous with regard to the state at a national level (the “disembeddedness” dynamic), and European institutionalisation of interstate relations at an international level (the “Europeanisation” dynamic). The disembeddedness dynamic corresponds to a strengthening of the interdependence relations between state actors (political, military, and administrative) and industrial actors. The Europeanisation dynamic reflects the strengthening of relations of interdependence between France and European states. Each of these dynamics that constitute a configuration corresponds to a part of the dilemma with which the state is confronted when procuring arms.

At the national level, the aim is to explain the state’s choice in favour of either the national option (Made in France) and European bilateralism, or European minilateralism and Franco-American bilateralism. In order to do this, a first hypothesis is formulated. The more the dynamic of industry becoming autonomous is strengthened, the more conditions are favourable to the state choosing European minilateralism or Franco-American bilateralism. In other words, the more the degree of interconnectedness between France’s state and industrial actors is weakened, the more likely it is that the state will decide to acquire a minilateral European (A400M) or American (C-17 and C-130) military transport aircraft. On the other hand, the more this level of industry becoming autonomous declines, the more favourable conditions are for France choosing the national decisional option or a bilateral European one. Put another way, the more relations of interdependence between French state and industrial actors are strengthened, the more likely it is that the state will decide to acquire a military transport aircraft that was made in France (the French Noratlas) or with one European state (the Franco-German Transall).

At the international level, the aim is to clarify the analysis, in the event that a dynamic of industry becoming autonomous is observed at a national level, by explaining the decision taken by the state in favour of either a European aircraft (A400M), or American aircraft (C-17 and C-130). To achieve this, a second hypothesis is put forward. The more the dynamic of Europeanisation is strengthened, the more favourable conditions are for the acquisition of the A400M by the state. On the other hand, the more this level of Europeanisation is weakened, the more favourable conditions are for an “off the shelf” acquisition of the C-17 and C-130 aircraft.

The way these two configurational dynamics position themselves with regard to each other produces four configurational structures (or hierarchies) that shape France’s military transport aircraft policy. They are described in the form of type ideals: the “amalgamated” structure, the “exclusive” structure, the “disembedded” structure, and the “inclusive” structure (figure 1).

First, the model of amalgamated configuration reflects a weakening of the dynamics of industry becoming autonomous with regard to the state and of
Europeanisation of interstate relations. It is thus distinguished by a strengthening of interdependence at a national level, that is, by long-standing, close, and collaborative relations between French state and industrial actors. Simultaneously, French actors maintain, at an international level, relations that are distant and conflictual with European actors.

Second, the model of exclusive configuration is defined by a weakening of the disembedded dynamic and a strengthening of the Europeanisation dynamic. It is distinguished from the amalgamated configuration, by strong interdependent bonds between state and industrial actors at a national level. Nevertheless, there is a high degree of Europeanisation of interstate relations between French and European actors.

Figure 1. The crafting of France’s military transport aircraft policy by four configurations

Third, the model of disembedded configuration reflects a two-fold dynamic: of French industrial actors becoming autonomous with regard to the state, and of Europeanisation of relations between French and European actors. It reflects a weakening of interdependence at a national level, between French state and industrial actors which maintain distant and conflictual relations. On the other hand, French and European actors are connected, at an international level, by collaborative connections.

Fourth, the model of the inclusive configuration corresponds to a dynamic of industry becoming autonomous with regard to the state and of a weakening of Europeanisation. It is defined, like the disembedded configuration, by a fall in interdependence at a national level, which reflects distant and competitive relations
between French state and industrial actors. On the other hand, it differs from the
disembedded configuration by a weakening of European interdependence, embodied
by distant and competitive relations between French and European actors at an
international level.

The result of this is a more precise formulation of the hypotheses (table 1).
The amalgamated configuration would explain the decision by the French state to
acquire a military transport aircraft that was made in France like the Noratlas. The
exclusive configuration would explain the state’s decision in favour of building a
bilateral European military transport aircraft like the Franco-German Transall. The
disembedded configuration would explain the state’s decision in favour of building a
minilateral European military transport aircraft like the A400M. The inclusive
configuration would explain the state’s decision in favour of importing American
C-17s and C-130s.

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<tr>
<th>Configuration</th>
<th>Arms procurement decision</th>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;amalgamated&quot;</td>
<td>Made in France aircraft</td>
<td>Noratlas</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;exclusive&quot;</td>
<td>Bilateral European aircraft</td>
<td>Transall</td>
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<td>&quot;disembedded&quot;</td>
<td>Minilateral European aircraft</td>
<td>A400M</td>
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<tr>
<td>&quot;inclusive&quot;</td>
<td>American aircraft</td>
<td>C-17 and C-130</td>
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Minilateral Europe Through “Disembedded” Configuration

A dynamic of monopolisation: formation of the “amalgamated”
configuration (1950–70)

After the end of World War 2, the first military transport aircraft bought by France,
the Noratlas, was produced by the Société nationale de constructions aéronautiques
du nord [National company in the Nord region for building aeronautical structures]
(SNCAN). SNCAN was a state enterprise that was born of the nationalisation of
France’s defence companies under the law of 11 August 1936, and of the merger
of several state-owned companies.1 SNCAN was renamed Nord-Aviation in 1958,
after it took over the Société française d’étude et de construction de matériels
aéronautiques spéciaux [French company for the study and construction of special
aeronautical equipment] (SFECMAS) in 1954. The pattern of integration of state
industries continued in the 1970s: in 1970, the Société nationale industrielle
aérospatiale [National industrial aerospace company] (SNIAS) was formed, by
the merger of Nord-Aviation, Sud-Aviation, and the Société pour l’étude et la réalisation
des engins balistiques [Company for the study and construction of ballistic devices]
(SEREB). At the same time, the armed forces minister set up an arms procurement

1 Potez, les chantiers aéro-maritimes de la seine (CAMS), les Ateliers de construction du nord de la France et des
Mureaux (ANF Les Mureaux), Amiot et Breguet.
The dependence of the DGA’s state actors increased vis-à-vis the research units of SNIAS, which could not work without credits from government contracts. The training of DGA and SNIAS armaments engineers in the same educational establishments, and their belonging to the same body of engineers from the 1960s onwards, reinforced their relations of interdependence (Giovachini 2000: 22; Hoeffler 2006: 24).

Following the production of the Noratlas, the Nord-Aviation company set up a research unit that specialised in the development of military transport aircraft, which consolidated the company’s close links to the air force and the DGA. At the European level, General Charles de Gaulle as president of France and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer as Chancellor of Germany signed the Elysee Treaty in 1963, which strengthened Franco-German cooperation, in the fields of education, youth, foreign policy and defence. It was in this political context that the armed forces minister, Pierre Messmmer signed, in 1964, a protocol with the German defence minister, Kai-Uwe von Hassel, for the construction of the Franco-German aircraft Transall.

During the 1970s the amalgamated ties that closely connected the air force’s officers with the engineers at the DGA and SNIAS were renewed. The launch of the projet de l’Avion de transport du futur [project for a future transport aircraft] (ATF) came at that time in a national context, as a former chief of staff of the armed forces revealed: “At the start, our idea had been to put together a [national] programme, and that later the others [states] would join us, as with the Transall. It was a question of not being part of an international process, because that is long, constraining, and expensive.” The amalgamated ties that connected the air force and the DGA to SNIAS made it “obvious” that the latter should be chosen to carry out the development studies. To continue studies on the ATF, SNIAS, which was renamed Aérospatiale in 1977, signed an agreement that same year with the American company Lockheed, which had shown interest in the project. These Franco-American industrial ties were broadened in 1983 by the Future International Military Airlifter (FIMA) agreement, which brought the German company MBB, British Aerospace, Spain’s CASA, and Italy’s Aeritalia into the studies for the ATF project.

However France, which was the only state to have expressly stated a military need for a new military transport aircraft, retained exclusive, close collaborative ties with Aérospatiale. The reproduction of these amalgamated ties between the air force, the DGA, and Aérospatiale limited the internationalisation of the ATF project to exchanges between French, European, and American industrial actors within FIMA. The formation, and then the reinforcement, of this amalgamated configuration generated an “order of monopolisation” in the military transport aircraft policy (Elias 1975: 88): one force (the air force), one procurement agency (the DGA), and one state-owned aeronautics company (Aérospatiale).

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2 From 1961 to 1977, the DGA (Délégation générale pour l’armement) was the DMA (Délégation ministérielle pour l’armement). Only the acronym DGA is used to avoid multiple acronyms.
3 Interview 41, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces (CEMA), Ministry of Defence, 17 March 2014.
5 The Air Force Staff approved the first military characteristics form (FCM) in September 1984.
A dynamic of disembeddedness: two competing configurations (1980–90)

In 1985, the military chiefs of the six other European states formulated an operational need for a new military transport aircraft to replace their Transall (Germany and Turkey) and their C-130 (Belgium, Spain, Italy, United Kingdom, and Turkey). France’s ATF programme then became the multinational Future Large Aircraft (FLA) programme.

In this context, the officers of the air force, and the armaments engineers of the DGA and Aérospatiale maintained their close and continuous relations, which they shared with officials in the finance ministry and diplomats in the foreign ministry (Joana & Smith 2006: 75, 78). More specifically, the FLA programme was supported by the chief of staff of the air force, General Vincent Lanata (1991-4), 6 the Délégué général de l’armement [general arms delegate] (DGA) Henri Conze (1993-6), 7 the director of the FLA programme at the DGA [agency], Michel Sancho (1991-01), and the CEO of Aérospatiale Louis Gallois (1992-6), 8 as well as the defence minister, François Léotard (1993-5). These French actors shared two convictions about France’s armaments policy in the 1990’s. On the one hand, the decision taken during the 1980s to produce the French fighter aircraft Rafale created severe budgetary pressures on the finances of the defence ministry: “There was a huge [budgetary] spike; we didn’t have the funds to pay for everything.” 9 In other words, “Made in France” was no longer an option in the 1990s for acquiring a military transport aircraft: it was a matter of finding a European compromise, or of “buying off the shelf”. 10 On the other hand, these actors preferred the option of minilateral Europe to the Franco-American option, believing that they could dominate the development of the former, but not of the latter. 11 However, the military transport aircraft policy was not shaped exclusively by the amalgamated configuration that brought together French actors through collaborative relations.

At the international level, the amalgamated configuration developed into a disembedded configuration that brought together French and European actors starting in the mid-1980s. From the start of the FLA programme in 1985, the engineers at the DGA, the generals in the air force, and the staff of industrialists at Aérospatiale interacted with their European counterparts on a regular basis to jointly carry out the development studies for the FLA. Moreover, these exchanges took place within a unique institutional setting: the Future Large Aircraft Study Group (FLASG, 1985–96) in the case of state players, and FIMA (1983–91) and later Euroflag (1991–5) in the case of industrial players (table 2). The origin of this relational disembeddedness reflects the transition from amalgamated ties exclusive to French actors, to relations of interdependence shared by French and European actors.

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6 Interview 33, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014.
7 Interview 7, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 12 December 2013.
9 Interview 49, General (Air Force), Ministry of Defence, April 1, 2014.
11 Interview 11, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 16 December 2013.
Table 2. International organisations in charge of negotiations for the FLA programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State actors</th>
<th>1985-93</th>
<th>1993-6</th>
<th>1996-00</th>
<th>2000-</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLASG (GEIP)</td>
<td>FLASG (GAEO)</td>
<td>FLAEG (GAEO)</td>
<td>OCCAR</td>
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|-------------------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|---------|---------|--------|-------|

At the national level, the amalgamated configuration faced competition from a “counter-configuration”, which opposed the option of European minilateralism. During the 1980s certain French actors maintained distant and conflictual working relations. This was the case with the defence minister André Giraud (1996-8) and Dassault Aviation. The result was the importation of the American C-130 aircraft, a decision taken by Giraud in 1987, even though “Dassault tried to block this decision through strong lobbying work.”

During the 1990s certain French actors opposed the development of the FLA programme. The defence minister Charles Millon (1995-7) significantly reduced the budgetary funds allocated to the European programme in 1996. The DGA [delegate] Yves Sillard (1989-93) did not consider the FLA a “priority” programme, and championed instead the option of Franco-American bilateralism, to meet the needs of the armed forces while also limiting budgetary costs. Within the DGA [agency], he was not the only one to express reservations about the FLA: “There were many who did not believe in the FLA for a single second!”

Finally, the CEO of the Société nationale d’étude et de construction de moteurs d’aviation [state owned company for developing and constructing aircraft engines] (Snecma), Bernard Dufour (1994-6) took a position against the FLA. The conflictual relations between the disembedded configuration and the “counter-configuration” weakened the possibility that the European minilateralism option might succeed.

For all that, the Franco-American bilateralism option did not prevail over that of minilateral Europe, because actors who opposed it were isolated from each other. At the national level, General Bernier, the DGA [delegate] Sillard and the CEO Dufour did not constitute – even though they championed the same position in favour of

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13 Interview 5, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 29 July 2013.
15 Interview 10, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 16 December 2013.
16 Interview 35, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014.
Franco-American bilateralism – an inclusive configuration. At the international level, Lockheed, which preferred to develop successor to the C-130 on its own, left FIMA in 1989, just two years after the start of the first technical studies for the FLA. Moreover, no source makes any reference to structuring transatlantic ties between European and American political, administrative, or military actors. In short, if there existed a “counter-configuration” opposed to the option of European minilateralism, the inclusive configuration is nowhere to be found.

**A dynamic of Europeanisation: the “disembedded” configuration (1990-00)**

At the end of the 1990s, in a post-Cold War context of budgetary restrictions, an increase in the cost of military equipment, and the growth of industrial competition at the international level, the socialist government of Lionel Jospin (1997–02) aimed for the same goal as the conservative government of Alain Juppé (1995–7): to promote the emergence of companies of a “critical size” that would enable them to rival Boeing. To attain this goal, two changes needed to be made according to French government players: to create a company with hybrid industrial operations (civilian and military) on a European market. At a national level, the merger of Thomson-CSF and Alcatel was announced in October 1997, and that of Aérospatiale and Matra Hautes Technologies in July 1998.

At the international level, after the withdrawal of BAe, which preferred to consolidate its industrial operations at a national level through its acquisition of GEC-Marconi, negotiations continued in 1999 between Aérospatiale and the German company DASA (Faure 2019c). A French actor party to these negotiations explained: “Once BAe had put itself out of contention, we shuffled the cards very quickly, talking to Daimler and attracting CASA to join us. From then on, the A400M programme had a positive resonance for everyone […] If we had not carried out this consolidation which led to EADS, building the A400M would have been much more unlikely.” EADS was formed on 10 July 2000, following the absorption of Aérospatiale-Matra, CASA, and DASA into the European group.

Although the generals of the air force and the engineers of the DGA were connected by amalgamated relations of interdependence to Aérospatiale from the 1970s until the end of the 1990s, they were connected to Aérospatiale-Matra and later EADS by disembedded ties from the end of the 1990s: “The ties between us [the state] and industry remained tight, very close, but they stretched. Before, the state was a shareholder, sponsor, and also had control. The DGA was very assertive in making its needs clear. Today, the state is essentially a sponsor.” Thus, a disembedded configuration was formed at the sector level of the military aeronautics industry, something that had seemed unlikely less than 10 years earlier.

The dynamic of relational disentanglement revealed at the sector level of the military aeronautics industry favoured the strengthening of disembedded ties that connected France’s state and industrial actors to the programme level of the A400M.

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18 Interview 47, Industrial, Safran, March 27, 2014.
19 Interview 33, General Delegate for Armaments (DGA), Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014; Interview 20, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 10 February 2014.
20 Interview 31, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014.
21 Interview 31, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014.
At the national level, the DGA [delegate] Jean-Yves Helmer (1996–01), who used to work in the automobile industry (PSA Peugeot Citroën), championed the “commercial approach” in the implementation of the FLA programme. The commercial approach was in line with the same market logic as the concomitant reform of the DGA [agency]. For Helmer, the FLA was a tool for putting into action and rendering legitimate the implementation of the administrative reform he was overseeing at the DGA. To achieve that, Helmer had at his disposal a close, direct, and permanent relationship with the director of the FLA programme. More specifically, this tie between them was interdependent: Helmer relied on the director of the FLA programme for implementing his reform of the DGA, and the director of the FLA programme counted on the hierarchical position of Helmer to guarantee the support of the DGA [agency] for the FLA. This position asserted by the DGA [delegate] was essential since many engineers at the DGA [agency] still expressed scepticism regarding the option of minilateral Europe: “It must be said that the ‘commercial approach’, we [the DGA agency] weren’t very enthusiastic about it, because it delegated to industry.”

Relations also became closer between the DGA [agency] and the air force, through the intermediary of the director of the FLA programme and General Robert Creuzé, who was in charge of the Commandement de la force aérienne de projection [projection air force command] (CFAP) from 1996. In contrast to his predecessor, General Bernier, General Creuzé maintained close, collaborative ties with the director of the FLA programme at the DGA. This tie between the programme’s director at the DGA and General Creuzé facilitated the formulation of France’s positions in advance of meetings of the Future Large Aircraft Exploratory Group (FLAEG, see table 2).

Finally, the disembedded configuration included relations of interdependence with political actors. On the one hand, France’s president, Jacques Chirac (1995–07), championed – against the advice of Airbus Military – the option of minilateral Europe (TP400) rather than the transatlantic alternative (PW180), to choose the engine specification of the FLA. The close ties between the CEO of Airbus, Noël Forgeard (1998-01), who had been a member of Prime Minister Chirac’s cabinet (1986–7) and supported the FLA programme, were decisive: “General Georgelin, who was then deputy head of Chirac’s military staff, told me how he had called Forgeard.” At the same time, President Chirac had distant and conflictual relations with the administration of George W. Bush, in the context of the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. On the other hand, the defence minister, Alain Richard, took charge of the A400M programme, which none of his predecessors had done. According to the director of the FLA programme at the DGA, the defence minister, Richard, played “a fundamental role in the A400M programme by clearly telling Germany: we will not buy either American aircraft or the [Ukrainian aircraft] Antonov 70.”

At the international level, the relations of interdependence maintained between French and European actors over several decades reinforced the dynamic of Europeanisation. At the sector level, Franco-German actors maintained relations

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22 Interview 33, General Delegate for Armaments (DGA), Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014.
23 Following an administrative reform, CFAP succeeded COTAM in 1996.
24 The FLAEG succeeded the FLASG (1985-96) from 1996. It was replaced by OCCAR in 2000.
26 Interview 52, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 3 April 2014.
of interdependence from the beginning of the 1970s: “European industry already existed in the field of civilian transport aircraft with Airbus Industrie, which favoured [the A400M]. Without Airbus Industrie [the A400M] would not have been built.”

However, it should not be assumed that Airbus Industrie’s position in favour of the FLA was taken for granted. Until 1998, Jean Pierson (1985–98) who was in charge at Airbus Industrie, did favour the Franco-German group’s commercial activities being hampered by the intervention of government actors regarding the FLA. The conflictual relations between Airbus Industrie and the FLAEG became more collaborative when Noël Forgeard (1998–01) succeeded Jean Pierson at the helm of Airbus Industrie in 1988. This development of the relational structure enabled a change in the position of Airbus Industrie in favour of the FLA. The latter was now seen as an opportunity to obtain government funding, via the commercial approach, which would enable it to finance the development of the A380 commercial aircraft to compete with Boeing: “It should be remembered that as well as the A400M, Airbus Industrie was developing the A350 and A380. It needed to find the resources fund its share of the additional costs of these programmes.” Another actor confirmed this: “At Airbus, the A400M was seen as a cash cow, simple as that.”

At the level of the programme, the Belgian, British, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Turkish actors had worked jointly within the FLAEG and Euroflag for 10 years: “There was an international team that got along well together.” This Europeanisation of interstate relations favoured the definition of common operational specifications. Moreover, without this collection of bilateral and minilateral relations forged in Europe since the start of the 1970s, European government actors would not have decided either to integrate Euroflag within Airbus Industrie by founding Airbus Military in 1995 (table 2), or to adopt the commercial approach. The decisions in favour of Airbus Military and the commercial approach, which were the result of the disembedded configuration, in turn produced a strengthening of the relations of interdependence between European actors, to the detriment of transatlantic relations.

First, because of the commercial approach Airbus Military became the prime relational junction point between European states and their companies that were taking part in the FLA programme. By limiting the number of “interfaces between actors” Airbus Military enjoyed the position of intermediary between states and national companies, which its role of “prime contractor” embodied. National prime contractors, such as DASA, no longer had an exclusive relation with their parent state? (Germany) but became dependants of Airbus Military’s position of intermediary. A French actor from the defence ministry described this unexpected process of relational disembeddedness: “Initially, the separation between the French and the Germans was very profound. We, the state, worked hand in hand with French

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27 Interview 11, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 16 December 2013.
28 Interview 41, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces (CEMA), Ministry of Defence, 17 March 2014; Interview 14, Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CEMAA), Ministry of Defence, 7 January 2014.
29 Interview 33, General Delegate for Armaments (DGA), Ministry of Defence, 4 March 2014.
33 Interview 80, Industrial, EADS, 28 October 2013.
companies. Then, the border shifted, leaving the states on one side and industry on the other.”

Second, this position of intermediary occupied by Airbus Military reinforced the institutional ties that connected its constituent companies to each other: “With Airbus and later with EADS, there was just one company. Of course, there could be disputes between one department and another, and disagreements between Germans and French endured. But that isn’t the same thing as battles between two separate companies.” Thus, Airbus Military favoured the formation of a converging, and then common, European industrial position between Aérospatiale, CASA, British Aerospace, and DASA, as well as Flavel, Ogma, and Tusas. As for the commercial approach, this made suppliers and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) more dependent on the prime contractor (Airbus Military). In other words, the prime contractor and subcontractors were connected by a relation of asymmetrical interdependence that favoured the former over the latter: “We are all in the same boat: the prime contractor, the subcontractors, and the SMEs. But we are not in the same position: there’s the captain, which is Airbus Military, and the rowers, who are the equipment manufacturers [suppliers] and the SMEs.”

Finally, the disembedded chain of interdependence between French and European actors does not consist only of minilateral relations. It also includes — confirming the results of Joana and Smith (2006) — bilateral ties, especially between French and German actors and French and British ones. Certain French administrative and military actors emphasise the closeness of their relations with British actors by a convergence of their national bureaucratic and strategic cultures. By contrast, for other French actors, their similarities with British actors can be a source of conflict, whereas their differences with German actors are seen as a source of political complementarity. Nevertheless, our study refutes the idea of political change according to which European negotiations were supposedly less favoured by the “Franco-German tandem” than by the Franco-British “Entente Cordiale” from 1996 (Joana Smith 2004a). On the one hand, Germany maintained a central decisional position during the second half of the 1990s. On the other hand, the United Kingdom was at the centre of negotiations before 1996, and its participation in the FLA programme was not certain after 1996: “Even if, from the start, we put pressure on the British to stay, we always feared they would drop us.”

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34 Interview 49, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 3 September 2013.
35 Interview 38, General Delegate for Armaments (DGA), Ministry of Defence, 21 July 2013.
37 Interview 56, Industrial, EADS, September 13, 2013.
39 Interview 86, Lobbyist, European Armaments Interest Group, 6 November 2013.
40 Interview 55, Senior Official, Senate, 12 September 2013; Interview 49, General (Air Force), Ministry of Defence, 1 April 2014.
41 Interview 52, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 3 April 2014.
42 Interview 49, General (Air Force), Ministry of Defence, April 1, 2014.
43 Interview 59, Senior Official, Ministry of Defence, 10 April 2014.
44 Interview 67, Senator, Senate, October 7, 2013.
45 Interview 139, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces (CEMA), Ministry of Defence, 13 March 2014.
Conclusion

Why did France choose European minilateral cooperation to acquire a military transport aircraft rather than bilateral European cooperation, a transatlantic partnership or the production of an aircraft “made in France”? Drawing upon a historical sociological approach to the political economy of European defence, this article has explained this decision in favour of minilateralism as a variety of differentiated integration in Europe. On the basis of fieldwork conducted with more than a hundred actors involved in the French military transport aircraft policy, France’s decision in favour of the A400M is explained by the disembedded configuration. This configuration is characterised by two historical dynamics: the autonomy of companies in the military aeronautics sector in relation to the state at the national level, and, in parallel, the Europeanisation of interstate relations at the international level. The constitution of this disembedded configuration was revealed through three historical sequences.

From the 1950s to the 1970s, an amalgamated configuration brought together exclusively by French actors (Air Force, DGA, Aérospatiale) was formed by a dynamic of monopolisation. This amalgamated configuration defended the production of a “Made in France” aircraft.

Between the 1980s and early 1990s, this amalgamated configuration unexpectedly evolved into a disembedded configuration. The launch of the Rafale fighter aircraft programme in the 1980s reduced the Ministry of Defence’s budget margins: in the 1990s, “Made in France” was no longer an option. This disembedded configuration supported the European FLA programme but remained weakly institutionalised. Moreover, it was in competition with a counter-configuration that opposed the option of minilateral Europe, without being able to collectively defend the option of Franco-American bilateralism: its actors are isolated from each other. Competition between these two configurations made it difficult, even in the early 1990s, to predict the decision-making outcome of the process at work.

From the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, the disembedded configuration won out using a reinforced Europeanisation dynamic of inter-state relations and the simultaneous absence of an inclusive configuration. This reconfiguration observed at the A400M programmatic level was encouraged by a similar movement in the military aeronautics sector: France would not have chosen the A400M, without the rapprochement of French and European state actors that led to the creation of EADS in order to face Boeing.

Beyond the articulation between state-industry and inter-state relations, this article has also developed the concept of interdependence, by revealing “transversal” institutional and sociological differentiation lines within the State, within the armed forces, within the administration, and also within the defence industry (Basaran, Bigo, Guittet, Walker, 2016; Faure, Joltreau, Smith, 2019b). This differentiation of “transversal” European integration, which cuts across a policy domain, an industry or a state, supplements the dynamics of “horizontal” differentiation (variations between states – i.e. national divide) and “vertical” differentiation (variations between policy domains – i.e. sectoral or industrial divide) (Moravcsik, 2018; Schimmelfennig, 2019). Indeed, a configuration brings together political and military and bureaucratic and industrial stakeholders.
Finally, if in this instance our configuration argument has been validated by France’s choice of minilateral Europe, does it explain other decision-making processes? It would be useful to continue this research in two directions in order to test the validity of the configuration argument. On the one hand, does the configuration argument work in the case of another type of decision taken by France: was the choice of the Rafale jetfighter or the Leclerc tank the result of an amalgamated configuration? Did an exclusive configuration determine France’s decision to acquire the Franco-British Jaguar aircraft or the Franco-German Tiger helicopter? Was the importing of the military UAV Reaper conditioned by the inclusive configuration? On the other hand, it is also important to verify whether the configuration argument captures decision-making possibilities in other national contexts – Spanish, Polish, German, British, etc. – in Europe, and if so, are the same structures of configuration present in each case? Indeed, many questions arise as to whether, beyond the A400M case, the configuration argument is heuristic for the development of a political economy of European defence and, moreover, if it is capable of explaining the dynamics of differentiated integration beyond the EU (Faure, Lebrou, 2019).

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