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FRANCE AND NATO



France and NATO: An History

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Translated by: Clémence Sebag

France was a co-founder of the Alliance, but in 1966 adopted a position that reflected its failure to reform NATO from within and guaranteed its independence. The recent decisions to reintegrate NATO's command structure followed from three factors: the geopolitical upheavals that have redefined the role of the Alliance; increased rapprochement in managing crises since the 1990s; and the wish to construct a common European defense policy, which can only be complementary to NATO.

politique étrangère

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's 60th anniversary summit, on 3rd and 4th April 2009, marked France's return to the integrated military command structure. This had been announced by President Sarkozy on 17th June 2008 when the new French *White Paper on Defense and National Security* (*Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité*)¹ was presented: "There is no reason why we should not be a part of NATO's military structures." France had parted ways with NATO 43 years earlier. The new move has been described alternatively as 'treason', the return of the prodigal son, and the end of the 'French exception.' What truth is there behind these characterizations? The fact of the matter is that France's involvement with NATO has varied over the years: it was a founding member which then became an inside protester, before voluntarily exiling itself and finally returning to the 'motherland'.

1. French Ministry of Defense, *Défense et Sécurité nationale : le Livre blanc*, Paris: Odile Jacob/La Documentation française, 2008, translated : White Paper on Defence and National Security, available on Ambafrance-uk.org.

A founding role within the new Atlantic order

After 1945, in the context of the Cold War, France obtains what it had wished for during both world wars: the United States, early on, takes a stand in Europe. Confronted with the Soviet threat, France is forced to take stock of its powerlessness and the inadequacy of its military means – even within the Western union, which is largely subordinate to the imperious Albion. In the event, France chooses to trust the great American ally, which – as soon as peace comes about – agrees to join with the Europeans in an Alliance restricted to the North Atlantic. France signs the Washington Treaty on 4th April 1949, thus becoming one of the founding members of the Atlantic Alliance. The Alliance's development into an organization in the early 1950s makes France an essential member by virtue of its geographical location – at a crossroads. Because of this, American and Canadian military bases are set up in France. Command structures such as Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), which is directed by an American general, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), are also set up in France.

Simultaneously confronted with decolonization, the leaders of the IVth Republic demand that the solidarity between allies not be confined to the Atlantic but apply everywhere that Western interests are concerned, particularly in the Mediterranean and in the Near East. The leaders of the IVth Republic also demand participation in the strategic direction of the Alliance in equal measure to France's role in NATO. By 1958, France's trust in the Atlantic Alliance has wavered. This is mainly due to American pressure during European Defense Community (EDC) debates, to the Suez crisis, and, in general, to the United States' support for decolonization. De Gaulle returns to power amidst a climate of anti-Americanism. French Communist Party (PCF) propaganda claiming that NATO is an American bankers' war machine aimed at the Soviet Union strikes a chord with the

De Gaulle feels that France needs to be independant from the US

population. The new president is particularly sensitive about the presence of American armed forces on national soil as part of NATO involvement. De Gaulle feels that France, without relinquishing its part in the Atlantic Alliance, needs to free itself from a state of dependence vis-à-vis the United States. He also feels that reforms are necessary within NATO. He particularly disapproves of the integrated military system, convinced that it is essential that France maintain complete control of its own defense.

De Gaulle's memorandum of 1958, sent to United States (US) President Dwight D. Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Harold Mac-

millan, sums up French demands. The lack of political coordination outside the NATO zone is the main source of discontent. An unambiguous request is made to extend NATO's geographical zone of influence. The memorandum makes two further key demands: that NATO's integrated system be reformed and that France be associated with the governing of the 'Free World.' The Americans and the British provide answers that are a clear bid for time and reluctantly agree to tripartite meetings. The meetings prove inconclusive, essentially because of disagreement on three major points: nuclear weapons, the integrated system (in other words, the role of French forces in the Western set-up), and differing visions of Europe.

While France is determined to acquire nuclear power, a symbol through which to regain her status, the United States, fearful of nuclear proliferation, attempts to halt procedures by denying help to the French program. The US does not take kindly to France's financial investment in nuclear research, as a result of which France is unable to invest in NATO's effort in terms of traditional weapons. What is more, the French army has concentrated its efforts on the fighting in Algeria and has therefore removed troops from central Europe. France denies permission for American missile ramps and stocks of nuclear weapons for American squadrons to be deployed on its soil. Because of this, fighter-bombers gradually retreat from NATO bases in France. In order to guide the Alliance towards a 'flexible response' and make nuclear warfare a last resort, Washington wants to encourage Europe to resort to traditional weapons. De Gaulle, on the other hand, feels that, in the case of a Soviet attack, nuclear weapons should be the direct response. Ultimately, de Gaulle seems convinced that the Americans will not use their own bombs under any circumstances – even to defend themselves. The Anglo-American Nassau talks (17th-21st December 1962) result in an agreement to form a multilateral nuclear force. France is invited to be part of this project but de Gaulle rejects the proposal as it would mean placing French defense in the hands of the United States.

The US denies help to the French nuclear program

In NATO's strategy of ever-increasing integration, de Gaulle finds further justification to accelerate France's withdrawal. According to him, the integrated military system places France in an insufferable position of subordination. It deprives France of an efficient and autonomous force; might possibly lead the nation into conflicts that are not hers (such as the Vietnam war); weakens the population's spirit of defense and, ultimately, strips high command of its sense of responsibility. De Gaulle intends to maintain French forces in a reserve role, as opposed to 'frontline' defense at the edge of the Iron Curtain.

Finally, the vision of de Gaulle and that of Kennedy of how Europe should be organized and the part the United States has to play in this new Europe could not be more dissimilar. The American president's plan to offer Europeans an Atlantic partnership is in contradiction with the General's vision of Europe – one that does not depend on the United States, yet shares the same values. This bears witness to the extent of the transatlantic misunderstandings that eventually lead to France's withdrawal from the integrated military organization.

Choosing independence: the emergence of modern Atlantic security

The decision made in 1966 is the logical conclusion to these Franco-American disagreements. The process starts in 1959 with the withdrawal of the Mediterranean French fleet from NATO's integrated command, followed by the withdrawal of naval forces from the North Atlantic in 1963. The decision, in 1966, to withdraw French land and air forces from Germany, where they were under the Alliance's command as part of its European base, simultaneously causes the withdrawal of two integrated NATO commands of which the French forces formed a part. Thus, the higher command of allied forces in Europe and the Central European command withdraw and are forced to relocate headquarters outside France. NATO allies, interpreting this as the beginning of a neutralist policy, reassert on 18th March 1966 their faith in the integrated military structure, as well as in a strategy of collective action in which the concept of national independence and sovereignty is outdated. President Johnson's response is far more tempered than some members of his administration would have liked, allowing for the possibility of a change of direction in French policy: "As our old friend and ally, France's place awaits her wherever she decides to resume her leading role."

France does, however, remain a member, not only of the Alliance proper, but also of NATO. France has only left the organization's integrated military structure. This withdrawal causes financial, social, strategic and logistic problems – particularly the evacuation of military bases and the departure of soldiers and their families. Communication and military plans are also further complicated, since the territory on which NATO's defense strategy can be executed is reduced. In spring 1966, tension is in the air during negotiations between France and its allies to establish the terms of the withdrawal. The aim is to come to an agreement on cooperation between French and allied troops. De Gaulle follows the negotiations closely, believing that it is opportune "to let this matter lie" because of "American reticence." It is not until August 1967 that, through an exchange of letters, the Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreement, the terms of

cooperation between NATO forces and the French army – which is to act strictly under orders of the government and under national command – are finalized.

While de Gaulle managed to remove France from the integrated military structure, he did not achieve the transformation of the Atlantic Alliance – which is actually strengthened by the difficulties of 1966-1967. Without the French opposition, the Americans are able to reinforce NATO's cohesion and their leadership, both on a strategic and political level, through the adoption, in December 1969, of the new concept of 'flexible response.' The Americans, who do not want to leave the management of East-West relations to the French, impose their bloc by bloc détente approach, at the same time as Paris is insisting on détente with the East, including via bloc per bloc dissolution. The Harmel Report (so named after Belgium's foreign Minister) in favor of a policy of détente – the American way – is approved by NATO's Council. With the re-emergence of the Soviet threat in 1968, hopes of détente are banished and, as a result, members of NATO rely more heavily on their American protector. Gradually, a pattern is established within NATO: since France is constantly in the opposition role, other members can rest assured that the French will contest American viewpoints, meaning they do not need to step forward themselves. Later, the French representatives will learn to come to direct agreements with the Americans, rather than fall into expected disputes. However, that is not the norm.

By 1969, France is a fully fledged nuclear power, having successfully tested a thermonuclear bomb in 1968; what is more, the French army is no longer part of NATO's integrated military system. General de Gaulle's March 1966 initiative has left a lasting mark on French politics and, until 2009, none of his successors will challenge his decision. Between 1966 and 2009, France's relations with NATO feature alternating phases of rapprochement and tension.

A famous example of the constant possibility of a crisis is the controversy provoked by Henry Kissinger's speech, in New York on 23rd April 1973. Kissinger proposed redefining relations between Europe and America as part of a "new Atlantic Charter" in which the United States would be trusted with worldwide responsibilities and Europe with regional responsibilities. Nevertheless, relations eventually return to normal within NATO. Prepared in George Pompidou's time, the Declaration on Atlantic Relations – essentially based on a French project – is signed by members of the Alliance in Brussels on 26th June 1974. It reaffirms US commitment to ensure Europe's security, while Europe recognizes it

cannot dispense with that same protection. The charter recognizes that British and French nuclear force play a part in defending the 'Free World;' both countries participate in NATO's global nuclear deterrent. This is a major shift since it legitimates the French nuclear force that was so widely criticized during Kennedy's time. Finally, the declaration creates a non-restrictive system of Atlantic consultation. The Valentin-Ferber agreements (July 1974) take things a step further than the Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreements. French forces can now intervene within the frame of the 1st Army (rather than only the 2nd Corps of the army), to prepare for engagement side by side with the allies.

An Atlantic Europe versus a European Europe

During their meeting in Martinique (14-16 December 1974), Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and President Gerald Ford agree that cooperation between France and NATO is an important factor in guaranteeing Europe's security. In the years that follow, the French defense doctrine gradually shifts from the sanctity of the national territory to the sanctity of a wider territory – Western Europe – thus demonstrating that France is widening its horizons. Agreements between General Méry, Chief of Staff of the French Army, and SACEUR General Haig cover the terms of possible coordination in case of tactical nuclear weapons (which the French army now has) being launched. As for the Euromissiles crisis, it is thanks to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing that, following the Guadeloupe summit (5-6 January 1979), NATO members reach the 'Double-Track Decision' on 12 December 1979. This decision is a proposal made to Moscow to start negotiations with a view to the withdrawal of SS20s, failing which Pershing II missiles and American cruise missiles will be deployed in Europe.

François Mitterrand was opposed to the 1966 decision to withdraw from the integrated military organization, seeing it as "voluntary isolation." Having voted a censure motion against this withdrawal on 20th April 1966, Mitterrand, once in power, reaffirms France's solidarity with the Atlantic Alliance amidst a renewal of East-West tension. France participates fully in Western summits; in June 1983, the Atlantic Council meeting is held in Paris for the first time since 1966. Above all, France's support for the Alliance is decisive in the Euromissiles crisis. Pacifism has been growing within European countries since 1980, greatly compromising NATO's cohesion, but France remains the exception. In his 20th January 1983 speech at the Bundestag, President Mitterrand declares himself in favor of the execution of the Double-Track Decision as a means of protection against the Soviet military threat. Mitterrand thus invites the Federal Republic of Germany, which at the time is being swept by a wave of pacifism, to

welcome Pershing II and Tomahawk missiles. This is a strong signal of French support for NATO and cooperation is reinforced.

Nevertheless, French and American rulers continue to differ in their idea of the future of Europe and NATO. At the Williamsburg summit (28-29 May 1983), the Americans want to achieve a common declaration on “global security,” as well as making Japan part of the Alliance. Mitterrand refuses to subscribe to the American idea of security guaranteed by a worldwide NATO. Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative proposal, during a speech on 23rd March 1983, is set to become yet another subject of discord.

After the collapse of the Soviet bloc, transatlantic misunderstandings persist and worsen between the Americans and the French. The years 1989 to 1993 are particularly tempestuous. The rift is not bridged and, in the post-Cold War climate, nothing seems improbable. In the autumn of 1990, Paris and Washington make contact in an attempt to resolve the question of the compatibility of the Atlantic Alliance with the construction of a stronger European identity; indeed, at that particular time, the Atlantic Alliance no longer seems relevant within the new geopolitical context. The French feel that Europeans will finally be able to assert themselves within a “strategic European identity.” Some take this further and wonder whether NATO still has a purpose now that the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet threat are no more. In Mitterrand’s opinion, a profound transformation of the Atlantic Alliance is the only way to keep it alive. But the Americans do not share this view. They are far from favoring an autonomous European defense entity. The Americans plan to stay in Europe and maintain their leadership. They also intend to give NATO a new direction, a “new Atlantism” as Secretary of State James Baker puts it in his 11th December 1989 speech. During a meeting in Key Largo, Florida, on 19th April 1990, François Mitterrand and George Bush exchange conflicting points of view about the future of NATO. At the London summit (5-6 July 1990), the Americans intend to promote their vision of a more political than military alliance. The Americans propose new strategic concepts that Mitterrand refuses to ratify.

Mitterrand expected a profound transformation of the Alliance, or its withering away

This spells the beginning of a race between NATO’s transformation and the launch of the European strategic identity (or European Security and Defense Policy, ESDP). Although the Atlantic Council of Rome (7-8 November 1991) recognizes that Europe (and particularly the Western European Union) has a part to play in terms of defense and security via the

ESDP, Mitterrand demonstrates his hostility towards the Alliance's new strategy and the broadening of NATO's mission by clearly prioritizing endeavors to build up European defense. Indeed, around the same time he launches a joint initiative with Helmut Kohl (6th December) aimed at achieving a "real foreign policy and a policy of common security."

As a result of the confrontation with Saddam Hussein following the invasion of Kuwait by the Iraqi army, the Americans feel that the French are the weakest link of the Alliance. Mitterrand, on the other hand, concludes that there is a fundamental difference of interests between Europeans and Americans. A Franco-German summit is held in La Rochelle on 22nd May 1992 in order to plan the European Corps (later the Eurocorps) – in other words, to "equip the European Union with its own military capacity." In the run-up to the summit, the Americans, fearing the prospect of a Paris-Bonn axis, put pressure on the German representatives. Consequently, when the meeting comes to a close German representatives issue the following statement: "The European Corps will contribute to the reinforcement of the Atlantic Alliance." The decision made in Oslo on 5th June 1992 by the NATO summit to support peacekeeping activities mapped out in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) leads to yet another quarrel between Paris and Washington.

Relations in the area of strategy improve when Clinton comes into office (1993-2001), chiefly because the United States seems to take a step back from the European continent with a drastic reduction in the number of American troops stationed there. Consequently, through compromise, many problems are solved. In January 1993, relations between the Eurocorps and NATO tighten: it is decided that in the event of a crisis the Eurocorps – including French units – can be placed under NATO's operational command. Previously Paris had accepted only the principle of 'operative control.' On 11th January 1994, the NATO Brussels summit endorses WEU use of NATO assets when the US is not itself involved and only for non-article 5 missions. France finally comes around to the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) concept and agrees to NATO's new peacekeeping missions.

Jacques Chirac in turn becomes President of the Republic. His goal is to take into consideration transformations in the international climate and improve relations between France and the US, as well as between France and the Atlantic Alliance. However, transatlantic relations are poisoned by commercial quarrels, technological rivalry and an increasing tendency towards unilateral diplomacy in the US. Chirac is forced to admit that the Washington Treaty has survived; what is more, former communist nations are applying for entry, which is granted to them from 1999 onwards. It

becomes clear that any European Defense will ultimately be linked to NATO since France's partners will not have it any other way. Continuing to favor a European Europe over an Atlantic Europe seems doomed to failure.

France and the Atlantic Alliance: integration with preferential treatment?

Conflict in the former Yugoslavia plays a part in this evolution. President Mitterrand has already agreed to modify France's position vis-à-vis NATO. On the premise that French troops are enlisted, he feels that France should be a part of decisionmaking and command. He therefore agrees that the French Army Chief of Staff be part of NATO's military committee in cases where use of military forces is envisaged. The Bosnian crisis convinces Jacques Chirac that the way forward for France lies within the realms of the Atlantic. With this in mind, the French president seizes the opportunity for negotiation with the US to arrange France's return to the organization, as well as a restructuring of the Atlantic Alliance that would give the European Defense Identity its full meaning. He hopes to be able to make the Alliance evolve from within. As early as December 1995, he chooses to make France part of NATO's military committee. The Minister of Defense, Charles Millon, also resumes his place within the Council of Ministers of the Atlantic Alliance. However, the Americans do not share the same mindset. The agreement made in Berlin (June 1996) on European Security and Defense Policy within NATO allows Europeans to take advantage of NATO's assets for humanitarian or peacekeeping purposes but offers only very limited and theoretical autonomy – under American control. Moreover, the French request that NATO command be restructured – with command of southern Europe going in turn to French, Italian and Spanish general officers – is turned down by the Americans. At the Atlantic summit held in Madrid (7-9 July 1997) France announces that it wishes to maintain its non-participation in the integrated military structure, on the grounds that its demands have not been met. Although there are hints of progress in the idea of European Defense (the Franco-British meeting in Saint-Malo in December 1998, the appointment of Javier Solana as leader of the ESDP, as well as the very existence of the ESDP), unresolved issues remain. Indeed, the coexistence of European Defense and the Atlantic Alliance as it stands (the Alliance is dominated by the US and has updated its Strategic Concept during NATO's 50th anniversary summit in Washington on 23-25 April 1999) seems improbable.

In other words, even before the 9/11 attacks, there is a wide gap between America and Europe. Yet while European members of NATO invoke the

mutual defense clause, the new policy of George W. Bush's administration is to subordinate the coalition to its own stated mission. This effectively spells the death sentence of the Atlantic Alliance, since in such conditions NATO's purpose seems all but clear. In spite of the partial retreat of American forces from Europe, the US continues to play a protective role towards Europe. Although Europe is no longer of strategic value to the US, America persists in asserting its authority within the Alliance, using all means in its power to prevent the emergence of true European Defense. The United States' wish is for NATO to evolve into a polyvalent organization. The French, on the other hand, strongly oppose this idea, fearing both increased American authority and a weakening of NATO. Therefore, during the Istanbul summit (28-29 June 2004) which approves the idea of NATO assisting Iraqi forces through training, Jacques Chirac opposes the American project of involving NATO in the process of stabilizing Iraq.

From now on, there is a clear rapprochement between France and NATO, as well as, on France's part, a stronger commitment than ever before towards the Atlantic military setup. France is closely involved in operations. A clear example of this increased commitment is Kosovo Force (KFOR): with

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rapprochement and
engagement**

1,700 men, France is the third strongest contributor of troops. France is committed to and involved in the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan, where French Special Forces have taken part in the Enduring Freedom operation since November 2001, and where, more importantly, with the

consent of Paris NATO has taken over peacekeeping since April 2003. As a result, the numbers deployed are constantly on the increase. Although this mission – which takes place outside the Euro-Atlantic zone and is under American command – is a far cry from the French vision, Paris has accepted it.

During the Riga summit (28-29 November 2006), several European states – including France – which have maintained troops in relatively peaceful zones in Afghanistan agree to lift restrictions on the deployment of their troops there, in order to support NATO soldiers involved in violent combat in southern Afghanistan. In April 2008, at the Bucharest NATO summit, France agrees to deploy more troops in Afghanistan, bringing the French contingent to over 3,000.

Is this new French policy in contradiction with past policy? The answer is no, because it comes after a series of attempts at rapprochement, as well as

gradual re-integration since 1995; so much so, in fact, that France is currently one of the five leading NATO contributors both financially and in terms of contingent. Another reason is that the geopolitical setup has been transformed, which in turn has led to a profound modification of NATO's role. The Cold War is over; the integration-system imperative has disappeared; American troops have essentially left Europe. Nowadays, NATO is an alliance with varying degrees of participation, participation is autonomous and the threats that NATO faces are vastly different to those of the past; what is more, the French army has moved towards the notion of rapid reaction. Nevertheless, this rapprochement between France and NATO, which for a long time was a matter of taboo, is rather symbolic. Despite assurances that France will retain its decisionmaking autonomy – particularly with regard to nuclear power – France's sacrosanct independence, which must be defended first and foremost from the Americans, seems to have been swept under the rug. As to whether a suitable compromise between the development of European Defense and NATO can be reached and whether France's gesture will be rewarded, only time can tell.



KEYWORDS

France
Atlantic Alliance
NATO
European Defense

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