

The Evolution of Contemporary French Defense Policy: Relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union

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Charles de Gaulle has had several legacies in French politics, most important and significant among them being the creation of a strong (dual) executive and the intense focus of the military on “[protecting] of French territory as opposed to the collective security of France and her allies”¹. The focus of this article is upon the latter, as well as the practical implications of France’s defensive ideology and strategy upon the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The two most evident features of de Gaulle’s defense policy are the importance of an “independent nuclear deterrent” and of pulling away from NATO’s “integrated military command”. These two ends are embodiments of six overall policy objectives, three of which are political in nature while the remaining three are military¹.

The independent nuclear deterrent achieves two of the political objectives: international glory and distinction, or a certain level of “prestige” linked to the restoration of France to an appropriate global position. A withdrawal from NATO, even if limited in scope, would fulfill the third political objective of escaping from “an unacceptable subordinate position vis-à-vis the United States”¹.

From a military standpoint, France’s own nuclear deterrent provides an ultimate guarantee of national security regardless of American nuclear presence, especially since that presence is regarded with distrust. A withdrawal from NATO would also prevent integration of military forces, thereby fulfilling the last objective of preventing involvement in an unwanted war¹.

Resulting from this stance of unilateral protection, in the 1970s, France developed a strategic nuclear force (FNS) meant purely for second strike capabilities. This was the core of France’s nuclear deterrent. Its purpose was to show that France would be able and willing to severely retaliate in response to an attack. Its means of determining when and how to use such incredible force was to first use conventional weapons as a test of the aggressor’s purposes. If the enemy continued its aggressive ways, “the use of tactical nuclear weapons would serve as a ‘last warning’ that France would retaliate massively.” In order for this strategy to be an effective deterrent, the threat of “last warning” needed to be perceived as a truly massive retaliation¹.

Despite French claims to the contrary, NATO officials considered FNS to be counterproductive to their doctrine and general security. NATO adhered to a “flexible response policy” that merely entailed a proportional conventional response to a conventional attack. The capabilities, however, should have allowed for a plausible escalation of force in case the initial response was not clearly understood. This escalation did not discount the involvement nuclear weapons in case the enemy, namely the Soviet Union, maintained a distinct conventional advantage¹.

The clash was that France felt NATO was discouraging nuclear deterrence, therein conceding that another war was inevitable. This was unacceptable to the French, victims of two successful invasions in the 20th century alone. They felt NATO did not recognize that modern conventional warfare could ravage the entirety of Europe more than tactical nuclear weapons

ever would. Further, France did not have the means to maintain a response force with multiple capabilities¹.

NATO, on the other hand, believed that French tactical nuclear weapons (ANT) did not help alleviate European security concerns, especially in the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). The short range of the Pluton missiles combined with their deployment in France only limited their potential¹.

French concerns over NATO only heightened with talk of American president Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) in the 1980s. The concept of negating nuclear deterrence in America had implications for NATO, which meant implications for France. The idea of losing the core of their military presence touched on critical security and political issues, as mentioned earlier. De Gaulle's two main military legacies, nuclear strength and a limited isolationism, were both threatened in one fell swoop by precisely his own concerns: American over-zealousness.

France believed, and still does in light of a stronger European Union (EU), that Europe must have its own nuclear deterrent. As SDI was eventually tabled and with current debate over National Missile Defense (NMD) escalating, there are growing concerns about the "increasingly uncertain American nuclear guarantee."¹ The overwhelming opinion was that France, as well as Europe, should not have to rely on outside help for defense, especially in the event of an unwanted war. To this end, ANT was clearly a means of protecting France and its "'vital interests,' which were defined as the protection of the 'national sanctuary' and of the immediate approaches to it."¹ This approach has contemporary ramifications as debate over EU expansion intensifies. France, in line with its defense doctrine, favors a "two-speed" expansion program in which "enlargement" of the EU wouldn't occur until the original 15 members have created a stable and settled system². This way France's military resources would not prematurely shoulder a portion of the burden of protecting the EU, a portion that would promise to be significant.

Even despite their traditional doctrine (nuclear deterrence, self protection), François Mitterrand's Socialist governments of the 1980s revamped its military, creating a rapid assistance force (FAR) comprised of five conventionally armed divisions, as well as introducing the Hadès ground-launched missile, to replace the Pluton for ANT. The FAR, though reducing the First Army's strength by 22,000 men, allowed for quick and easy troop deployment alongside NATO forces at the beginning of or even prior to European conflicts. The advanced Hadès missile had a range of up to 350 kilometers, as opposed to the 120 kilometers of the Pluton, thus providing a wider range of defense. The restructuring, however, did not compromise their traditional doctrine, as the new missiles were to remain in France and the First Army would be allowed greater flexibility in executing its role as a NATO reserve force¹.

These modernizations to the French military forces still did not quiet all dissent, however. With the Soviet risk seemingly increasing, West Germany, though somewhat reassured, was still discontented with the view that French nuclear forces still almost solely defended French interests. This perception, in fact, disturbed most of NATO, especially the United States, upon whom West Germany was very reliant. To counter these charges, France loosened other restrictions upon NATO involvement and looked into bolstering logistical support for NATO activities, including contingency plans involving "full wartime use of French territory, facilities, and lines of communication." In fact, in 1983, for the first time since 1966, France permitted NATO planes in sea-air exercises to refuel in French airspace¹.

As France discovers ways to spread its national security to aid more of Europe, new debates are constantly arising. The current defense concern before the EU and NATO is over the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). While it chaired the presidency of the EU, France spearheaded a new European security arrangement that was agreed upon in the 2308th European Council of Ministers meeting in Brussels in November, 2000. It states:

In the field of military capabilities, which will complement the other instruments available to the Union, at the Helsinki European Council the Member States set themselves the headline goal of being able, by 2003, to deploy within 60 days and sustain for at least one year forces up to corps level (60,000 persons). These forces should be militarily self-sustaining with the necessary command, control and intelligence capabilities, logistics, other combat support units and, as required, air and naval elements. In Helsinki the Member States also decided rapidly to develop collective capability goals, particularly in the field of command and control, intelligence and strategic transport. At the Feira European Council the European Union also encouraged the countries which have applied for membership of the EU and the non-EU European members of NATO to contribute to improving Europe's capabilities³.

The so-called rapid reaction force (RRF) set out in this meeting is the focus of the new tensions. The United States regards the RRF as an attempt to weaken its position in Europe, cutting it out of European defense. France, taking the lead as President, has been vocal in claiming that it and Europe are still committed to NATO, but that they need a means of establishing their own security, independent of American aid. French president Jacques Chirac proclaimed that the European force "should be independent (from NATO); coordinated but independent"⁴.

The need for such a purely European force was understood and articulated in the wake of the war in Bosnia. After noting that Western nations were unable to react quickly to the deteriorating situation in Bosnia, European nations realized the need for a fast-acting EU force which could respond to challenges NATO turned down⁵. As Chirac put it, "Nobody in Europe disputes the principle and the importance of the Atlantic alliance. Secondly, it appears clearly that if Europe...needs to intervene in areas where Americans aren't concerned, it must have the means to do so"⁴.

American concerns also focus on the last sentence of the Council of Ministers's statement; that non-European members of NATO should aid the RRF's efforts. The practical implications of this phrase is that the force will need access to NATO's "heavy hardware, high-tech satellite communications and strategic transport"⁶. It is also reported that then-US Defense Secretary William Cohen indicated prior to the official proclamation of the creating of the RRF that the EU jeopardized undermining NATO and the US, if it insisted on "separate planning operations for the rapid reaction force," as the Agence France Presse puts it⁶.

Chirac has noted the need for North American assistance, saying, "We respect the essential nature of the Atlantic alliance. We cannot do this (RRF) ignoring the United States, nor can we do this ignoring Canada." He and Canadian prime minister Jean Chrétien have since established a quarterly meeting arrangement to discuss European security issues, among them

the RRF. As a result of these meetings, Canada offered to take part in the RRF's future missions⁵.

Chirac, in spite of his softening remarks, has made it clear what France's goal is in creating the RRF. Follow his remarks about an independent force, he proclaimed that "...Europe is determined to bring its own contribution to its own security." Caught in the midst of the differences between the French leadership in the EU and the American government is Great Britain. British officials have been trying to balance French and American interests, at least in front of the media, claiming that the RRF is "entirely consistent [with NATO's objectives]... You're trying to set up differences of opinion which do not exist," as one official put it⁴.

In its role as President and even afterwards, as Sweden currently holds the position, France has been at the forefront of this debate. It is the latest step in its efforts to de-link its own security from foreign interests. Clearly France has understood that with the increased importance and significance of the EU, with the common currency and deregulated borders among other changes, security concerns can no longer focus on traditional "vital interests" which used to be regarded as simply "the national sanctuary." As a defense specialist for the French political party RPR (Rassemblement pour la République) put it in 1983, "[T]he security and liberty of its allies is a vital interest for France, indistinguishable from its own liberty and its own security"¹.

France's fundamental goal, since the days of de Gaulle, has been to establish a "multi-polar world rather than the unipolar system of American dominance"⁷. The French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine declared in March 2001, "For us, the French, there can be no multi-polar world without a strong Europe as one of its poles"⁷. France's defense evolution, through its changes from the original FNS of Pluton missiles to the expansion policies of Mitterrand (Hadès missile, leaner First Army), it has maintained its determination to establish a pole of influence in Europe. It persisted in its use of a strong nuclear deterrent despite NATO efforts to create a "flexible response policy" based on conventional weapons. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, France has come to realize that it no longer faces an immediate danger from a neighbor, or even from another European nation. With this realization has come its opening to the EU and the reforms it has brought not only to defense policy in Europe but also economic and social policy.

France, just as any other nation, looks out for its own interests. In the current era of information and technology, globalization has made the world a smaller place, with information traveling across the world in seconds. This drastic change since even 20 years ago has changed the nature of the quest for national security. The change has only made it more apparent now than ever that de Gaulle was correct in predicting the global hegemony the US would become. The US may be an ally to Europe, but it is clear that to maintain a balance in the world and an ability to quickly resolve regional crises, there needs to be "an autonomous Europe, an independent strategic actor on the world stage that maintains close links to the US but insists on the freedom to chart its own course without American involvement"⁷. The time is especially critical with the current onslaught of elections across the world. In the summer of 2000, when France still held the EU presidency, prior to the American presidential election, Védrine was asked if its results would influence the outlook on Europe. His response was:

I do not believe a change in administration will change anything fundamentally with regard to the basic aspects of French and Euro-

American relations. Our state of mind will remain the same: being open, pragmatic, and geared to defending our interests⁸.

Endnotes

- ¹Robert Grant. "French Defense Policy and European Security." Political Science Quarterly. Volume 100, Issue 3. Autumn 1985. 411-426.
- ²"Redefining Europe." BBC World Service: Europe.
www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/europe/index.shtml. 21 April 2001
- ³2308th Council Meeting - General Affairs. Brussels, 20 November 2000. Council of Ministers Press Release. Commission of the European Communities. 9 January 2001.
- ⁴Bryant, Elizabeth. "Europeans downplay Cohen criticism on EU force." United Press International. General News. 7 December 2000.
- ⁵Cohen, Tom. "Canada, EU set up regular meetings on new European defense force." The Associated Press. International News. 19 December 2000.
- ⁶"NATO defense ministers meet after last-minute EU accord with Turkey." Agence France Presse. International News. 5 December 2000.
- ⁷Walker, Martin. "Walker's World: Multi or hyper?" United Press International. General News. 25 March 2001.
- ⁸Krause, Axel. "Hubert Védrine: Foreign Minister of France." Europe. July/August 2000. No. 398.