

France and NATO: A Historical and Geopolitical Approach of a National Paradox

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On the next Atlantic summit (Strasbourg-Kehl, April 3-4 2009), France should be involved in a full-participation into the NATO military structure. Last year, France expanded its contribution in Afghanistan, as far as becoming a significant player against this Islamic front (Bucharest, April 2-4 2008). The decision of returning to military structure is seen as a rupture in the French attitude towards NATO and the US. Indeed, De Gaulle's decision, in 1966, to withdraw French troops from the military structure threw NATO into a serious crisis. However, it must not be forgotten that France is a founding member-state of the Atlantic Alliance. It's after De Gaulle's decision that NATO became a "bogyman" for a part of French leaders and public opinion. In the following years, French authorities had to set the fracture between their country and NATO. At the end of the Cold War, François Mitterrand and Jacques Chirac have long championed the European defence over NATO but new challenges ran to increase France's participation into the Atlantic structures. In fact, rather than a rupture, a full participation would be the headline of a long-running evolution since the seventies of the past century. The rupture would be more in the psycho-political sphere. What is the stake is to reduce the gap between the mental representations and the strategic realities, that is, in other words, to reduce what one could name the "cognitive dissonance".

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This speech is about France and NATO relations more precisely about the French attitude towards NATO, an attitude which could be described as a paradox or more exactly a series of paradoxes. Indeed, France is a founding and historic member state of the Alliance but it has long seen NATO as something strange, far off and disquieting. France is an Atlantic and Western nation which has long championed the idea of a European Defense over Alliance and this major contributor to the NATO-operations, from many years, was outside the NATO military structure and only now returning in it. So, we shall try to explain this national paradox in its historical and geopolitical context.

The first point will be about the French Atlanticism and its historical features, in order to understand the decision of De Gaulle (1966, March 7) to withdraw from the NATO military structure. The second point will be focused on the French decision to fully participate in this military structure: could it be analysed as a rupture? Then, in a third point, we shall approach the renewed interest of Paris for NATO and so the new challenges of NATO ("Out of area or out of business?").

A historical perspective of the French Atlanticism

In order to understand the French attitude towards NATO, we have to put things into perspective and go back to Paris' diplomatic priorities in the aftermath of the Second World War. Then, French priorities were the following ones: ensuring national security against a possible new German threat,

placing France as the first power in Western Europe and preserving the Colonial Empire. Yet, the East-West break upset these projects; the Soviet threat had to be faced down. With Georges Bidault then Robert Schuman as Foreign ministers, French diplomacy worked in the direction of a Western Pact and when the Atlantic Alliance was signed, Paris insisted on the necessity of "integration". It was not yet a coarse word.

At that time, France's territory was in the heart of the Atlantic political and military system; it was a logistic and strategic hub. French authorities aimed at enhancing their rank in Western Europe and they wanted their country to be recognised as the third big nation within NATO, together with the United States and the United Kingdom, but the overseas military engagements monopolized troops and resources (in Indochina, then in North Africa). France's means allocated to NATO were not enough to meet national ambitions - to become one of the three Atlantic leaders - and all of France's Allies (not only the US) were not ready to give France a specific status.

So, France was increasingly frustrated. On November 1956, the Suez crisis revealed the scope of the unrest and even more when Charles De Gaulle came back to power, in 1958. Initially, De Gaulle wanted to set up a three-side group (a sort of steering board) at the head of NATO but the US and European Allies did not follow up on the French proposals. Then, De Gaulle took the first initiatives that suggested that France would withdraw from NATO military structure. In short, France failed to place itself as the first power in Western Europe and to take the lead within NATO as within the European Community with the failure of the "plan Fouchet", in 1962.

Thus, a national approach was preferred with a strategy centred on the French nuclear forces (the "force de frappe"). Based on independence and greatness, this policy was aimed at challenging the American hegemony, without questioning the Atlantic Alliance (the Alliance without NATO). France obtained a specific status but only by being a part from the other allies and not ahead. This decision had a heavy cost on each side. Then, NATO lost its umbilicus and was in a shambles; France went out of the internal political circuit and the influence of the French language decreased within NATO structures. The Alliance as a whole was weakened by this crisis.

France's full-participation in NATO: rupture or not rupture?

In fact, what is at stake in the France's decision of full-participation in the NATO military structure? Some of the main stakes is to reduce the gap between French representations and strategic realities, this gap being what psychologists name the "cognitive dissonance", and to increase the France's "return on equity" in terms of influence within NATO, on NATO strategic concept, political guidelines and defense policy.

Indeed, in the aftermath of the decision to withdraw French militaries from the Allied Commands, Paris had to set the fracture with NATO. Since 1967, several military and logistic agreements have been signed and in the eighties, the French Battle Corps was called to play a growing role in Centre-Europe. At the end of the Cold War, new challenges ran to increase French participation into NATO structures.

However, there was a gap between the strategic realities and the representations of most of the French people even among the political class. More than a gap, it was a rift! For many French people, as it has been previously said, NATO was something strange and far off. It was just an US tool. For a part of them, NATO was even a bogeyman or a sort of a spectre. For almost all of them, "integration" was a taboo word.

Nevertheless, if we see things as they stand, French full-participation in the NATO military structure is rather the headline of a long-running evolution, since the seventies of the past century, than a strategic rupture and the "rupture" would be more in the psycho-political sphere.

The French full-participation is a *sine qua non* condition for a better "return on equity" also for a boosted Europe of defence, yes indeed. Above all, this decision seems to be necessary for the public spirit and the *aggiornamento* of French geopolitical representations. It means that France is not an "exception" but a European and Western nation. This decision is a rupture with what we would call the "French Titoism", in quotation marks of course.

The renewed interest of France for NATO

Now, in a third and last point, we shall question the renewed interest of France for NATO. Indeed, France has long championed the "European Defense" over NATO in the past years but it must be acknowledged that this "European Defense", as "Europe Power", is more a project (even a draft) than a political and strategic reality. So, no-one in Europe would be ready as we say in French, "lâcher la proie pour l'ombre", i.e. to let go the prey for a shade.

In fact, the European Union is rather a Pan-European Commonwealth than a Commonwill. It is a Union without a unified Foreign Policy, diplomatic clout and strong military capabilities; even without a common overall picture. Amidst this large and heterogeneous Commonwealth, there is not a benevolent hegemonic leader fit to establish a strong consensus. So, the European Union is not yet able to be turned into a global actor of International relations.

In Europe, NATO is always the main defense and security organization. More than a strong and enduring alliance, it is a Western community of security, with a civilization background, and a bridge between Europe and North America. NATO remains a geopolitical equilibrium point for the European states. So do we have to think both NATO and the European Union. A zero-sum game between these organizations would be a tragic error.

In short, renewing NATO is a demanding task for guaranteeing our defence, yes indeed, but also for spreading freedom and establishing the rule of law in all of our continent. In consequence, it is necessary to practice the open door policy. It would be another tragic error to accept new ideological fault-lines in Europe and on its confines.

I did insist on regional security but what about the "out of area" and the "globalization" of NATO?

This debate is not abstract or even less abstruse. NATO and its state-members are engaged in Afghanistan to avoid the reconstitution of an Islamist Emirate which would be a hub for world terror. More generally, threats are not only regional but global. The European governments agree with this threat assessment since the "European strategy of security" which was accepted in 2003.

Although most of the Europeans are too much self-centred and inward-looking, they already have - and they will have - to engage themselves, to face down various threats, and for a long time. The quick-in and quick-out approach is no longer valid; it is a long haul. Most certainly, the European Union is able to lead civilian and smaller-scale military missions but NATO and the American driving force are still necessary for larger-scale military missions.

So do we have to find an equilibrium point between regional security at the boundaries of the Euro-Atlantic ensemble (Southwards and Eastwards) on the one hand, global security by involving on distant theatre of operations on the other hand.

The challenge is to be up to deploy troops in the most remote corner of the world if necessary not only out of compassion but for our security interests, for our responsibilities and for our values. At the same time, we have to keep the geographical, historical and cultural background of NATO i.e. the European dimension.

This challenge requires that the European Allies, or some of them, should develop a common and robust strategic culture underpinned by a global expeditionary mindset. In fact, if the European Allies want NATO to remain an Alliance centred on Europe, they will have to share the common burden with the US, even more, and to provide additional means (troops and weapons) so as to weigh more heavily in the political making-process.

At last, to conclude ...

Let's summarize: what is required for France and the European allies is to be present worldwide, where and when it is necessary, but also to avoid any trap or any imperial overextension that could endanger the regional security. So do we have to preserve the article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. To be up to reach these goals, "only NATO" or "only Europe" would be a stalemate. We shall have to combine these two platforms.

At least, self-preservation is not enough to found a community of defence and the Allies need to keep in mind their "great idea" i.e. their heritage and ideals which are the founding-stones of the Alliance. Let's think of the preamble to the North Atlantic Treaty and to the Western moral and political philosophy.

In the emerging world, this challenge of civilization could even require a sort of "Universal State", as in the Arnold Toynbee's historical theses, or a "cooperative Empire", but it would be another debate.

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