

WHY FRANCE REJOINS NATO: WOOING BRITAIN?

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Abstract

The author analyses a not much discussed dimension of President Sarkozy's decision to join the NATO military command: the Franco-British relationship. President Sarkozy has been criticised by the opposition parties, as well as by members of his own UMP party, for having given up the goal of strengthening European defence. The author, however, argues that European defence is a driving motive behind President Sarkozy's decision. Sarkozy knows that in order to build a European defence, he will need Britain, which is the 'indispensable nation' in the European Union for such an enterprise. But Britain will only give up its traditional suspicion of French initiatives if France no longer considers European defence and Atlanticism a zero-sum game. By giving up its position of a permanent outsider and by becoming a 'normal', full fledged member of the Atlantic Alliance, President Sarkozy hopes to woo Britain. But it is not yet sure if this strategy will work.

Introduction

When De Gaulle decided in 1966 to leave the integrated military command of NATO and ordered the US to withdraw its soldiers from French soil, President Johnson let Secretary of State Dean Rusk ask the Gaulle if this included the American soldiers buried in French war cemeteries. There never came an answer. This anecdote reveals the deep wound that the French decision inflicted on the Franco-American relationship. French President Nicolas Sarkozy has decided that it is time for a change. At the NATO summit, on 3 and 4 April 2009, France will make its comeback in Atlantic military structures. When Sarkozy announced this rapprochement shortly after his election, the most critical reactions came not from his own Gaullist UMP party, but from the Socialist Party and the centrist Democratic Movement, parties that in 1966 still were fierce opponents of De Gaulle's decision. In an article in the French daily *Le Monde* (March 6, 2009), Hubert Védrine, former Socialist Minister of Foreign Affairs, is not impressed by the commands of Norfolk and Lisbon, offered to the French. "Has the nationality of the officers, who receive and transmit

instructions of the Pentagon, any importance," he asked, "without radically changing the decision-making process in the Alliance, which, even today, cannot be hoped for?" And Ségolène Royal, presidential candidate for the Socialist Party in 2007, attacked Sarkozy's plans in an article in the same paper (February 17, 2009). She said not to believe Sarkozy's argument that the reintegration into NATO would help France's efforts to build an independent European defence: "One cannot ask European defence to progress and at the same time spend more money for NATO."

Sarkozy: the anti-De Gaulle?

Sarkozy is depicted by his opponents as the anti De Gaulle, someone who squanders De Gaulle's heritage. By bringing France back in the NATO fold, he would give up France's independent international position without getting something in return. But if we take a closer look we will see that Sarkozy is more Gaullist than his opponents want us to believe. Like De Gaulle he is a protagonist of centralized power. Sarkozy, the 'hyper president', is even the most centralizing president after De Gaulle. He also is a staunch defender of the French *force de dissuasion*, the French nuclear deterrent, for which he has announced a modernization program in the defence White Book, published in the spring of 2008. Sarkozy cannot be accused, either, of not wanting to conduct an independent foreign policy, utilizing Europe as a vector of French *rayonnement* (radiation) in the world, as De Gaulle did before him. The French EU Presidency in the first half of 2008 is a proof to the contrary. So, what is exactly the difference with De Gaulle?

If you can't beat them, join them

The difference is, that Sarkozy, unlike De Gaulle, has given up the idea that it is possible to build a European defence independently and against the Anglo-Saxons. In fact, his predecessor, Jacques Chirac, had already reached this conclusion, when, in 1995, he proposed to rejoin NATO's military command. Chirac asked in exchange that a French officer would head the South Command, which was unacceptable for the U.S. Thereupon Chirac retracted his offer. Three years later, in 1998, Chirac turned to Britain and signed a 'Joint Declaration on European Defence' in Saint-Malo with British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Although this gave an impetus to European defence, the British remained suspicious of French afterthoughts and especially of French plans to set up an independent European headquarters for planning and commanding European missions. This suspicion was fed by Chirac's awkward initiative to set up such a headquarters for the short-lived European Security and Defence Union, that he founded together with Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg at the Brussels 'chocolate summit' on April 30, 2003 – just at the end of the war in Iraq.

Britain: the indispensable nation?

Sarkozy knows from Chirac's experiences in the 1990s that it is not possible to build a European defence against NATO and independent from NATO. Sarkozy's rapprochement with NATO has other reasons than just those to please the

Americans. He knows that France's self-isolation does not work. And he also is conscious of the fact that, if France wants to build a European defence, there is one country in Europe that is 'the indispensable nation': Britain. But so far all French attempts to bind Britain closer in a more independent European defence project have failed because of Britain's deep distrust of a partner that is suspected of wanting to undermine the Atlantic Alliance. Sarkozy expects that Britain will lose its distrust of French-inspired defence projects as soon as France has become a full fledged member of NATO. Former French defence minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, hinted to this in an article in *Le Figaro* (February 17, 2009), when she wrote: "The unwillingness of certain European countries to make the necessary efforts to reinforce European defence will be easier to overcome when they will be assured that this will not be built against NATO."

Of course the wish of a bilateral Franco-British rapprochement is not the only motive behind the French initiative. There are other fruits France wants to reap from reintegration, such as an enhanced interoperability of the French army with the armies of the US and the European NATO members, and to use joint training opportunities with the US military to boost the modernization of the French army. Full NATO membership could also give French armaments industries access to the juicy defence procurement market of the United States. Louis Gallois, CEO of the aeronautic group EADS, told *Le Figaro* (9 February 2009) that he indeed expected an economic spin-off from the French NATO decision: "We will have to adapt ourselves to this new context. France hasn't participated for forty years in NATO procurement programs or participates only in a very marginal way."

Sarkozy: 'gaulliste' or 'gaullien'?

Many French socialists and Gaullists doubt Sarkozy's Gaullist credentials. And one thing is sure: he is certainly not a Gaullist in the classical sense, someone who does not want to change one letter in the Testament of the founder of the movement. Ironically, it is the non-Gaullists of the MoDem and the Socialist Party who take this position. Sarkozy, convinced that it is time to change, has taken his decision without hesitation and against all opposition from his own party and the opposition. In behaving like this he has showed himself to be less a *gaulliste* than a *gaullien*: he has acted as the General would have done, taking bold and daring decisions, not afraid to go against the current when he deemed this necessary.

A New Battle of Britain?

The necessity for the French to woo Britain gives Britain more leverage than it was accorded by Zbigniew Brzezinski in *The Grand Chessboard* (1997), where Brzezinski wrote: "...Great Britain is not a geostrategic player. It has fewer major options, it entertains no ambitious vision of Europe's future, and its relative decline has also reduced its capacity to play the traditional role of the European balancer. (...) London has largely dealt itself out of the European game." For France's project of a European defence, however, Britain's cooperation is indispensable. Much depends, however, on how future British-American relations will develop. The fact that in the run up of

Gordon Brown's first visit to Obama the 'special relationship' between the U.S. and Britain was not mentioned and instead was referred to a 'special partnership' caused some nervousness in British diplomatic circles, where one feared a downgrading of the bilateral link under the Obama administration. The U.S. administration has, however, an interest in taking away the British doubts. Because France's return to NATO could not only spell good news for the United States. It could bring a rapprochement between France and Britain, lead to a further Europeanization of NATO and a strengthening of European defence initiatives. By some American analysts this is considered as a potential danger. In a recent publication of the conservative Heritage Foundation (WebMemo No. 2320 of March 3, 2009), for instance, Sally McNamara wrote that Secretary Clinton must "approach the French reintegration issue with much more caution. Secretary Clinton must realize that the creation of a separate EU defense identity will cause lasting damage to the transatlantic security alliance and will give France an unprecedented opportunity to pursue an agenda that will be inimical to American interests." The French reintegration into NATO, which is for the one a return to the U.S. fold, is for others the arrival of a dangerous Trojan horse. The British, however, are the ones who are going to decide on the outcome of this contest. The outcome of this new 'Battle of Britain' is undecided. One thing, however, is sure: with euro-sceptic Conservatives waiting to make their comeback in Downing Street, the success of Sarkozy's charm offensive to woo Britain is far from assured.

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A longer article of the same author on this subject has been published by Elcano Royal Institute, Madrid, with the title "France and NATO or How to Build a European Defence" (ARI Paper No. 40/2009), and can be accessed at

<http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal>