DEN NORSKE ATLANTERHAVSKOMITE
THE NORWEGIAN ATLANTIC COMITTEE

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FRANCE AND NATO: FROM OUTLIER TO LEADER?

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In 2009, France announced that it was rejoining the NATO integrated military command after 43 years of absence. The reasons why general de Gaulle had decided in 1966 to leave the NATO military structures – though not NATO itself – are well-known. He believed that military integration was now less necessary because of the East-West *détente,* and that it was too often a vehicle for US political domination over Europe. He also thought that the vulnerability of the US territory made American extended deterrence increasingly incredible. Finally, because of his ambitious foreign policy agenda, he also wanted to be perceived as being fully independent from Washington. The 1966 withdrawal and the edification of a national nuclear deterrent were thus two faces of the same coin. (This "renationalization" of defense was explained by Defense minister Robert Galley to Henry Kissinger in 1971 in the following terms: "It is because we are not in NATO that we are able to concentrate on national defense. Because the French can pay taxes in France for their defenses and not for those of Norway" [sic].)

This did not mean that France would have been less reliable as an ally if war had come to Europe. Indeed, Paris reaffirmed at many occasion that it would fulfill its Article 5 commitments, and concluded agreements with NATO about the contribution its forces would play for collective defense. In fact, it can be argued that the 1966 withdrawal made it politically sustainable for successive French governments to spend more on defense that they might otherwise have done without de Gaulle's decision.

France still takes pride in following a foreign policy independent from the United States. So why the 2009 reintegration? First, Paris has taken part in all common military operations since NATO began such operations in the early 1990s, sometimes even taking a leading role such as lobbying for action in Bosnia in 1995 and in Libya in 2011; but its position prevented it from being fully involved in all aspects of Alliance military activities related with doctrine and strategic planning. (This does not mean, however, that French forces were less interoperable with other NATO forces than its partners were.) Second, Paris conceded in the mid-1990s – after Chirac was elected president – that it was impossible to build a European defense identity without increased trust and cooperation with its European Union [EU] partners, most of which were members of NATO. These two reasons were behind the first French attempt to negotiate its return in the military command in 1995-1996. (It failed due to diplomatic mistakes on both the French and the US side, including in particular a direct *démarche* by president Chirac for a European to take command of Allied Forces Southern Europe [AFSOUTH], which has always been led by an American.) Sarkozy's election added a third rationale of a more ideological nature, which tilted the balance in favor of reintegration without preconditions: he believed that it was unnatural for France to not be fully part of a Western military organization. Hence the 2009 decision. Importantly, it should not be seen as the mirror image of the 1966 one – France remains an independent nuclear power.

Reintegration involved costs. From a political standpoint, the Sarkozy decision was not seen positively by many in the French elite, from the Socialists to the traditional Gaullists: it was feared that Paris would from now on be seen by the outside world as less independent from Washington. From a financial standpoint, reintegration raised the French annual budgetary contribution to NATO from 170 to about 200 million Euros, making it approximately equal to that of the United Kingdom. (France's share of common budgets is to decline slightly in the coming five years due to the effects of enlargement.) Until now,

SELECTED FRENCH MILITARY OPERATIONS SINCE 1990

COUNTRY	DATE (beginning)	FRAMEWORK	MAIN PURPOSE
Lebanon	Since 1978	Ad hoc, then UN mandate	Peacekeeping / evacuation
Chad	Since 1986	Defense agreement	Various
Slovenia/ Croatia	1991	UN force	Humanitarian
Kuwait	1991	UN mandate (ad hoc operation)	Coercion
Cambodia	1992	UN force	Stabilization
Somalia	1993	UN force	Humanitarian
Rwanda	1994	UN mandate	Interposition
Bosnia	**1995**	**UN mandate (NATO operation)**	**Peacekeeping / stabilization**
Kosovo	**1999**	**UN framework (NATO operation)**	**Coercion / stabilization**
Afghanistan	**2001**	**UN mandate (NATO operation)**	**Counter-terrorism / stabilization**
Ivory Coast	2002	Defense agreement / UN mandate	Interposition
DRC	2003	UN mandate (EU operation)	Humanitarian
Horn of Africa	2008	UN mandate (EU operation)	Counter-piracy
Libya	**2011**	**UN mandate (ad hoc, then NATO op.)**	**Coercion / protection**

Paris assigned about 120 military officers to the Alliance structures; it now has nearly 1,000 out of a total of 1,120 attributed personnel.[1] These assignments abroad will incur an additional cost of 70-80 million Euros. Thus the total yearly cost of reintegration is more than 100 million Euros.

1 920 "embedded" personnel in military commands, 40 at the French representation to NATO, 75 for national cells in military staffs, and 85 in agencies and schools.

Positive effects

But it also of course had benefits. France's move changed its standing within NATO. Its positions and proposals are are to a greater extent listened to and taken into account. Since reintegration it has taken particularly strong positions on at least three topics: the importance of nuclear deterrence, the need to have a common threat evaluation including Iran, and the need for budgetary and organizational reform (for which a Senior Officials Group headed by ambassador Benoît d'Aboville made a report in 2010). French influence is now also stronger when it comes to elaboration of NATO plans and concepts. Though

the French tend to bid for high positions as opposed to sometimes more influential "intermediary" positions (just like they do in the European Union), it is both symbolically and substantially important that a French general officer now heads Allied Command Transformation. Finally, French industry has benefitted from a doubling of its contracts with the NATO Maintenance and Supply Agency [NAMSA] (from 50 to 100 million Euros), even though it only makes up for about 5% of the total.

France's reintegration also had an impact on the French defense establishment. It has further enshrined the "NATO culture" within the military in terms of planning and careers.

Status quo

It should also be noted that there are areas where it did *not* have an impact.

France's nuclear deterrent was untouched. Though French authorities were aware that membership in the Nuclear Planning Group [NPG], or even a formal commitment to common nuclear planning, would not have encroached on the independent nature of the nuclear force, such moves were judged too politically sensitive from a domestic standpoint. Some also believe that the credibility of the French deterrent, in the eyes of a potential adversary, might have been affected.

Contrary to what Paris had stated or hoped for, reintegration did not make its European allies more eager to develop a separate EU command structure. Some would say that Sarkozy never really sought to leverage France's reintegration in this regard.

Reintegration did not have any impact on the French-American relationship, which has in fact a life of its own. For instance, the personal relationship between the two presidents was much warmer under Bush than it is under Obama.

France's positions on common military operations have not really been affected one way to the other.

Progress in Afghanistan and the end of the US "surge" contributed to the French announcement of the withdrawal of 1,000 soldiers in 2012 (about 25% of the contingent). A jump in French casualties in the summer of 2011 comforted the decision. However, the domestic political costs of the Afghan war has been minimal (despite widespread opposition in the polls), and the toll for the French armed forces remained, in November 2011, inferior to what it had been in Bosnia (75 against 80 dead).

FORCES HAVING PARTICIPATED IN UNIFIED PROTECTOR OPERATION
4,200 personnel
40 aircraft
20 helicopters
10 ships (including aircraft carrier Charles-de-Gaulle)

The Libya operation

On Libya, Paris initially – for a few days – resisted transferring the military command of the operations to NATO. Observers of France's stance vis-à-vis NATO recalled that it had likewise been initially reluctant, in 2002, to the idea of a NATO operation in Afghanistan. One common reason in both instances was that Paris has always been mindful of the NATO "label", which could make Western interventions in Muslim countries exceedingly provocative. The strength of this argument can be debated, since two Arab countries ended up participating in the operation. Moreover, it did not square well with Sarkozy's mantra that "France is part of the Western family". But there were other reasons: major allies did not want to participate, Turkey did not want a NATO operation either, the United States was not so sure – and planned to take a back seat anyway after the initial strikes. (This created a rare open crisis with the Secretary General, leading the French representative to leave the North Atlantic Council meeting room, along with his German colleague. The Secretary General was reported to have stated his displeasure that France was making trouble so soon after having reintegrated.) However, turning to NATO was non-negotiable for London, and any hypothetical alternative would have been long and difficult to improvise.

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Except for the initial campaign, the Libya operation was militarily dominated by Paris: it conducted 25% of all air sorties, 35% of air offensive sorties, 85% of helicopter strikes, and 86% of Navy strikes (97% of offensive strikes). Would such a role have been possible without French reintegration? This is what Sarkozy claims, reportedly arguing that it was the proof that Paris had negotiated its reintegration with success. The initial political impetus was given by London and Paris without NATO being involved. However, officials at NATO HQ insist that the new position of France was critical in ensuring the French-British leadership of the operation. It is also certain that the transfer of the military command of operations to NATO would have taken longer to organize without French reintegration.

The reintegration has changed, though perhaps not fundamentally altered France's role in the Atlantic Alliance. Paris was not an "outlier" during the Cold War, and it has participated in all NATO operations since 1994. Its position of "leader" in Libya was due to exceptional circumstances which may not be repeated any time soon. What has changed is that France has gained a role in NATO which is at least equal in status with the United Kingdom. Given Berlin's enduring hesitations in becoming a full-fledged strategic military actor, the increasing French-British defense cooperation, and Washington's apparent willingness to defer to its European allies when its key strategic interests are not at stake, the French-British couple appears to be an increasingly important player in the Alliance.

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