

“Transatlantic Security Issues from the Cold War to the 21st Century”

Geneva, 23-24 April 2009

PANEL 2: COUNTRY PERSPECTIVES: AN EVOLUTION

The Fifth Republic and NATO: odd-man out or the only country in step?

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It is widely accepted that the French Fifth Republic has been generally cool towards NATO, if not actually against it. Or at the very least that Paris chose under de Gaulle to take a specific position inside the Alliance (France would be allied, but not integrated) which was later imitated by Spain when she joined, and for a brief moment in 1990 suggested by Moscow for reunified Germany. It was then referred to as "the French solution". It was often considered a special case, if not an outright oddity, explained by the idiosyncrasy of the "Grande Nation".

There is no dispute that many in France, even at government level, felt exactly that way. They were quite happy with that special status, and did not wish to see it extended to other Alliance members, certainly not to the Federal Republic: the whole point for France, even during the Fourth Republic, was that NATO would be as useful to control Germany as to deter the Soviet Union. Integration was therefore great for the Germans. At the same time others believed (and the Gaulle itself at times) that the French position was not just accidental, politically convenient or even self-serving, but evolved from a concept for the Alliance that could be valid, in Kantian terms, for all its members. Many French sincerely thought they had actually a better concept for NATO, and that it was the other countries that did not want to fall in step.

It could be argued there was a French concept for the Atlantic Alliance, which, at times, Paris tried to get accepted by the other countries. The Alliance should remain an organization among sovereign States, without loss of independence or freedom of decision for its members. Integration was acceptable at command level in time of war, but always rescindable ("mise à disposition opérationnelle"). Moreover, it should not impair the development of a European foreign policy and defence entity. Generally speaking, if pushed too far and instated already in peacetime, integration deprived the national governments of their democratic legitimacy (which rested on independence) and led to a loss of commitment for defence in each country, and thus diminished the overall effectiveness of the Western defence system.

Nuclear weapons could not be shared, deterrence was their only possible use ("flexible response" was too dangerous for the Europeans, because it made a war in Europe possible, and it gave the US an opportunity to downgrade their commitment). The existence of several national nuclear decision centers created uncertainty for the adversary, and so enhanced deterrence. The Alliance was certainly directed against the Soviet threat, and rested on common values, but should not develop into a Western grouping, under American direction, hardening the divide of the Cold War, blocking any evolution towards a West European Union and a new security system for the whole continent which could overcome the Cold War. The Atlantic Alliance was acceptable, certainly not "atlanticism". "Out-of-area" was not unthinkable, but only provided the European allies, particularly Great-Britain and France, had their say

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and that it remained on an ad hoc basis (and did not become a substitute for the UNO).

Moreover, even before 1958, the French believed that division of labour (each country doing what it could do best) was better than integration, which was felt as demotivating. With of course the idea that the French, like the British, had a special role to play, because of their world responsibilities. There was a distinct continuity in Paris along those views, despite some variations, from 1958 to 2007. We shall explore that continuity, and also some occasions when Paris tried to get its partners to agree to some reform of the Alliance along those lines. President Sarkozy announced in 2007 that France would rejoin the integrated NATO structures, provided a European decision-centre be accepted inside the Alliance. It is argued in some quarters, provided that result were to be actually achieved, that this is not a complete change of direction, but other commentators see a momentous change in French policy. The jury is still out, but the future paper might help to clarify the argument.