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# France in NATO

## An evolving Gaullian agenda

Christelle Calmels

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*An evolving Gaullian agenda*

**Christelle Calmels**

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By Christelle Calmels

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# Table of contents

The author	vii
List of abbreviations	ix
Introduction	01
1 Between continuity and change: France's contemporary NATO policy	05
2 The NCS adaptation: containing the command structure expansion	23
3 The launch of eFP: defending a limited deployment in the East	37
Conclusion	49



## The author

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### Nota Bene

This *NDC Research Paper* is based on the author's doctoral research: C. Calmels, *Influence in a military alliance: the case of France at NATO (2009-2019)*, Doctoral thesis in Political Science, supervised by Prof. Frédéric Ramel, Paris, Sciences Po, 2021, unpublished.

February 2022





# List of abbreviations

ACCS	Air Command and Control System
ACO	Allied Command Operations
ACT	Allied Command Transformation
AUKUS	Australia, United Kingdom, United States
AWACS	Airborne Warning and Control System
BACO	Baseline Activities and Current Operations
C2	Command and Control
DAS	Délégation aux Affaires Stratégiques
DGRIS	Directorate-General for International and Strategic Affairs
DPP	Defence Policy and Planning
DPPC	Defence Policy and Planning Committee
eFP	enhanced Forward Presence
ERI	European Reassurance Initiative
EU	European Union
IMS	International Military Staff
MLE	Maximum Level of Effort
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NADGE	NATO Air Defence Ground Environment
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCS	NATO Command Structure
NICS	NATO Integrated Communication System
RoE	Rules of Engagement
SACEUR	Supreme Allied Commander Europe
SACT	Supreme Allied Commander Transformation
SEG	Senior Experts Group
SHAPE	Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe
TACET	Transatlantic Capability Enhancement and Training

UK	United Kingdom
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VCOS	Vice Chief of Staff

# Introduction\*

On November 7, 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron declared to *The Economist*: “To my mind, what we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO. We have to be lucid”.<sup>1</sup> Macron’s lament regarding NATO’s loss of political and strategic purpose occurred against the backdrop of a crisis of multilateralism, one fuelled by national governments’ growing discontent and disinvestment from international organisations. This precarious situation deteriorated further with the outbreak of a worldwide pandemic, which revealed the difficulties international organisations face when coping with global crises.

In early 2022, the situation had not improved. While the health crisis remains ongoing, multilateralism is today bogged down by new and lingering challenges. The chaotic US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the Taliban’s subsequent return to power in Kabul have exacerbated the bitter failure of NATO’s out of area ventures. The September 2021 Australia-UK-US (AUKUS) submarine deal has also shaken the transatlantic bond, undermining Franco-American relations just as Western Allies seek to reconfigure their Indo-Pacific strategies.

The current international environment demonstrates that multilateralism and the inner workings of international organisations are far from irrelevant. Now more than ever, scholars and experts must investigate the decision-making processes that characterise international organisations and the behaviours of their member states. Doing so would enable a better understanding of collective answers to the issues that emerge within the evolving international security environment.

In that regard, the case of France is an appropriate entry point considering its global clout and multilateral activism. While critical of some international organisations, France remains a vocal proponent of multilateralism, having called for an “alliance for multilateralism” that defends “a multilateral order based on respect for international law”.<sup>2</sup> With the implementation of Brexit, moreover, France now benefits from a unique position in the international system: it is the only state to possess a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and enjoy membership within both the European Union

\* The author would like to thank Dr. Amelie Zima, Dr. Thierry Tardy, Mr. Thomas Fraise and Mr. Pierre de Dreuzy for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1 “Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead”, *The Economist*, 7 November 2019.

2 “L’Alliance pour le multilatéralisme”, *France Diplomatie*, last updated in November 2020.

(EU) and NATO.

Yet, little attention has been paid to France's behaviour within NATO – this, despite its 2009 return to the NATO Command Structure (NCS) following 43 years of absence.<sup>3</sup> This *Research Paper* seeks to fill this gap in the academic literature. It analyses how France has sought to influence the direction of the Atlantic Alliance since the 2014 Ukraine crisis and explores how it positions itself within contemporary debates regarding NATO's mandate. Influence here should be understood as the process by which one or more actors modify the environment, behaviour, perceptions, or beliefs of one or more other actors in a desired way.<sup>4</sup> It is to be distinguished from power, which is either a status (*puissance*) or an ability to act (*pouvoir*). Hence, this study focusses less on the degree of influence that France achieves within NATO – hard to measure in an organisation based on consensus – than on France's influence strategies. France's influence within NATO is investigated relationally to shed light on its prevailing negotiating behaviour and to better understand its role within the Alliance.

More specifically, this paper postulates that France is hardly an agenda-setter in NATO and mainly exercises its influence through reactive negotiation strategies. It shows how France's return to the NCS in 2009 has undeniably increased its ability to monitor NATO's decision-making process but has only marginally impacted its historical wariness towards the organisation.

The *Research Paper* begins with a global assessment of France's policy towards NATO. By adopting a historical approach, it highlights the elements of continuity and change in the French behaviour within the organisation, highlighting that the Gaullian<sup>5</sup> mindset regarding NATO affairs remains prevalent in France despite marginal developments on niche topics. The paper then dissects two decision-making processes regarding the adaptation of the Alliance to current security challenges: the reform of the NATO Command Structure (NCS) between 2016 and 2020 and the 2016 decision to launch the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) on the Alliance's Eastern flank. Each case study breaks down France's attempts to shape the NATO decision-making process according to its views in order to determine its predominant negotiation behaviour within the Alliance.

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3 France's return to the NCS has spurred the emergence of new analyses in the late 2000s. This literature mostly centres around the impact of such a reintegration on French foreign policy: it is more the "natoisation" of France and its European ambition than the "francisation" of NATO that these scholars seek to investigate. Besides, this literature often neglects the post-2009 period, which is mainly addressed prospectively.

4 See: R. Cox, H. Jacobson (eds.), *The anatomy of influence. Decision making in international organization*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1973.

5 By "Gaullian", the author means a transpartisan diplomatic posture intended to preserve the fundamental values defended by de Gaulle on the international stage. Conversely, a Gaullist posture stems from political ideology. In this paper, the author will solely address the Gaullian posture.

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In terms of data collection and methodology, this research first builds on open-source and classified data from archives, official websites, public statements, and memoirs to triangulate sources and offer the most accurate account possible. Second, it relies on semi-directive interviews with military officers, diplomats, politicians, (international) civil servants, and contractual agents from NATO member states. These interviews were conducted in Paris, Washington, Norfolk, Brussels, and Mons between October 2018 and April 2021. Finally, it rests upon five months of participant observation while embedded with the French military delegation to NATO Headquarters in Brussels between March and August 2019.



## Between continuity and change: France's contemporary NATO policy

A founding member of the Atlantic Alliance, France has experienced complex relations with NATO and its Allies since the Alliance's creation in 1949. Tensions reached their peak in 1966 with the French withdrawal from NATO's military structure under the presidency of Charles de Gaulle. France's NATO policy then remained relatively stable until Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to reintegrate France into the NATO Command Structure in 2009. Today, if one can observe the persistence of a Gaullian mindset in NATO affairs, which suggests a sense of French distance *vis-à-vis* the Alliance, the emergence of a more "positive agenda" is noteworthy as it demonstrates a gradual evolution towards a less reactive posture. As a result, proactive influence strategies aimed at shaping NATO's agenda now coexist with more cautious historical practices in the exercise of France's NATO policy.

### Post-1945 France and the quest for influence

#### *France's lobbying for an Atlantic pact*

After World War II, France was slow to express concerns publicly regarding the USSR and the security risks it posed to Western Europe. In reality, the French government's hesitancy was a façade that masked an increasingly negative perception of the USSR among French political-military elites. This behavioural change first took root in the bitter assessment of France's post-war powerlessness, reflected in its absence from the Yalta and Potsdam conferences.<sup>6</sup> The country was suffering from immeasurable human, industrial, and infrastructural losses. It emerged from the war politically unstable and economically drained with weakened military forces facing rising tensions in the African and Indochinese

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<sup>6</sup> C. Cogan, *Forced to Choose France, the Atlantic Alliance and NATO-then and now*, Westport, Praeger, 1997.

colonies.<sup>7</sup> Another driver of perceptual change was the clientelist logic put into place between France and the United States with the signing of the Marshall Plan in Paris on September 20, 1947.<sup>8</sup> Besides, the advent of the Kominform in October 1947, followed by worsened national strikes supported by the French Communist Party, only added fuel to the growing uneasiness of the government *vis-à-vis* the USSR.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the image of a Soviet threat gradually took precedence over the German one in the minds of French officials.<sup>10</sup>

In December 1947, after the failure of the Moscow conference and the bilateral treaties with Warsaw and Prague, the French government officially broke with its neutrality policy.<sup>11</sup> Foreign Minister George Bidault sent a memorandum to United States (US) Secretary of State George Marshall indicating France's willingness to create an alliance with the United States.<sup>12</sup> This decision led to secret talks between representatives of the United Kingdom (UK), the United States, and France in the following months.<sup>13</sup> These talks occurred against the backdrop of French-UK-Benelux negotiations on a western European alliance, which intended to demonstrate Europe's determination to defend itself and to encourage the United States to engage more significantly in the continent's defence. In March 1948, one month after Soviet-backed Communists launched a *coup d'état* in Czechoslovakia, France, the UK, and the Benelux countries concluded the Brussels Treaty, creating the Western Union Defence Organisation. On June 11, 1948, the United States Senate then adopted the Vandenberg Resolution, which permitted the US to conclude peacetime alliances (long a taboo in the country) and heralded the start of concrete negotiations on an Atlantic

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7 V. Auriol, P. Nora, J. Ozouf, *Mon septennat 1947-1954*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970.

8 W. Hitchcock, *France restored. Cold war diplomacy and the quest for leadership in Europe, 1944-1954*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

9 G. H. Soutou, "Les dirigeants français et l'entrée en guerre froide: un processus de décision hésitant (1944-1950)", *Le Trimestre du monde*, 3e trimestre 1993.

10 Scholar Geneviève Rouche underlines that some French diplomats were still very much anti-German in 1948. G. Rouche, "Le Quai d'Orsay face au problème de la souveraineté allemande. La conjonction des accords de Bonn et de Paris des 26 et 27 mai 1952", *Revue d'Histoire Diplomatique*, 1990, Vol.1-2.

11 The Moscow conference gathered the French, British, American, and Soviet foreign ministers (the "Big Four") in March 1947 to discuss peace in post-World War II Europe. They failed to reach a consensus on peace treaties with Germany and Austria during this meeting. For their part, France's bilateral treaties with Warsaw and Prague could be considered as an attempt to build a bridge between the West and the East and balance the USSR's influence in the region. See: E. Piet, "Le regard de la diplomatie française sur le déplacement de la frontière germano-polonaise de 1940 à 1950", *Bulletin de l'Institut Pierre Renouvin*, Vol.35, No.1, 2012; M. Allard, "La France face à la soviétisation de l'Europe de l'Est: le cas tchécoslovaque (1944-1948)", in F. Bozo (ed.), *Relations internationales et stratégie: de la guerre froide à la guerre contre le terrorisme*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2005.

12 P. Grosser, "Chapitre 7. L'entrée de la France en guerre froide", in S. Berstein (ed.), *L'année 1947*, Presses de Sciences Po, 1999.

13 Ernest Bevin, Clement Attlee, and General Morgan represented the United Kingdom, Harry Truman, George Marshall, and General Ridgway represented the United States, and George Bidault, Robert Schuman, and General Billotte represented France. P. Billote, *Le passé au futur*, Paris, Stock, 1979.



Pact. Foreign Minister Robert Schuman (who replaced Bidault after a ministerial shuffle in 1948) and French Ambassador to the US Henri Bonnet now worked together to advance negotiations on what would become the North Atlantic Treaty (Washington Treaty).

However, US Secretary of State Dean Acheson took sole control of the negotiation process by initiating bilateral consultations with each candidate ally before drafting a first version of the Treaty.<sup>14</sup> As a result, France was prevented from taking a proactive role during negotiations. A diplomatic note written by the Secretariat General of the Foreign Ministry in January 1949 highlights its frustration: “Leaving aside drafting details, we can say that most of the articles of the future treaty are produced in Washington”.<sup>15</sup> A major concern for French decision-makers related to the inclusion of France’s North African colonies in the Treaty, which was initially agreed upon during the 1948 London Conference but then erased in the first American draft of the text. Consequently, Henri Bonnet insisted on the reinsertion of the colonies or at least Algeria, which was a “matter of domestic politics”, in the text.<sup>16</sup> Italian participation in the treaty also emerged as a contentious point during negotiations. France advocated for its participation to rebalance the Alliance towards its areas of interest, while the American draft primarily focused on the North Atlantic region. By threatening the United States to refuse to sign the treaty, the country obtained the inclusion of Algeria in Article 6 and the accession of Italy to the new Alliance. The allies eventually signed the treaty on April 4, 1949, in a context of growing French disappointment and dissatisfaction towards its American partner. Less protective than that concluded in Brussels a year earlier, the North Atlantic Treaty reinforced France’s perception of the United States as hesitant to engage in Europe in the event of a conflict.

### ***An ambition hampered by the Fourth Republic’s torments***

Once ratified, the Allies set out to establish bodies responsible for implementing the Treaty, a four-year negotiation process that also emerged as a source of frustration for France. The country pushed for the establishment of a military headquarters in France as part of its vision of “forward defence”. By contrast, the United Kingdom promoted a peripheral defence of Europe and seemed reluctant to allocate resources on the continent

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14 J. Raffik-Grenouilleau, *La quatrième république et l’alliance atlantique*, *op. cit.*

15 Note from the General Secretariat to the Minister (Top Secret), Atlantic Pact, Paris, 7 January 1949, in G.H. Soutou (ed.), *Documents diplomatiques français 1949 (1er Janvier-30 Juin)*, Tome I, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

16 M. Chauvel, Letter from Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to M. Bonnet, French Ambassador to Washington, Paris, 5 January 1949, in G.H. Soutou (ed.), *Documents diplomatiques français 1949 (1er Janvier-30 Juin)*, Tome I, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

itself. French stakeholders suspected the UK of using both its privileged position in the Brussels Treaty's political organs and its military channels of communication with the United States as leverage to impose its views on Alliance policy and exclude France from Alliance leadership.<sup>17</sup> To break this deadlock, French negotiators recommended that the future commander of the Allied forces in Europe be American.<sup>18</sup> They also proposed the creation of a tripartite steering committee comprised of the US, UK, and France that would be located outside the United Kingdom and have full authority over the Alliance. US negotiators welcomed this proposal with caution but offered an option that generally satisfied key French demands – specifically, the creation of a North Atlantic Council (NAC), a defence committee, and a tripartite standing group. Although less ambitious than the steering committee imagined by France, the standing group at least symbolically granted France inclusion in a tripartite directorate separate from the other Allies.<sup>19</sup>

On December 18, 1950, the defence committee then created three NATO military commands. General Dwight D. Eisenhower was appointed Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and chose France over the UK as the host country for Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE).<sup>20</sup> This represented success for the forward defence option supported by France, which first welcomed SHAPE in Paris (Hotel Astoria) before moving it to nearby Rocquencourt in 1951. The establishment of a civilian headquarters in Paris followed suit in 1952.

Celebrations were short-lived, however, as France faced new challenges within the newly created command structure. Only 67 officers out of 500 were French, and only three of the 100 most senior positions were held by French officers. This low number stemmed from some Allies' reluctance to give France key positions; more important, though, was France's inability to provide officers to the command structure due to post-war restructuring of its

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17 M. Massigli, French Ambassador to London, to Mr Parodi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, personal letter, London, 19 March 1949; Note from Mr Goussault to Mr Parodi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Necessity to maintain military contacts with the United States (Top Secret), Paris, 26 April 1949; Telegram No.10153 from Mr Bonnet, French Ambassador to Washington, to Mr Schuman, Minister of Foreign Affairs (Top Secret), Washington, 21 February 1949, in G.H. Soutou (ed.), *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1949 (1er Janvier-30 Juin)*, Tome I, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

18 Personal letter from Mr Massigli, French Ambassador to London, to Mr Parodi, Secretary-General of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, London, 26 March 1949; Letter from M. de Margerie, on mission to the Conference Secretariat, to Mr Couve de Murville, Director of Political Affairs, Paris, 19 April 1949, in G.H. Soutou (ed.), *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1949 (1er Janvier-30 Juin)*, Tome I, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

19 From 1949 to 1966, the standing group gathered French, US, and UK military representatives to provide political instructions and military information to NATO military bodies, as well as recommendations to the Military Committee to which it was subordinated. Note from the General Secretariat to Mr Ramadier, Minister of National Defence, Paris, 26 September 1949, in G.H. Soutou (ed.), *Documents Diplomatiques Français 1949. Tome II 1er Juillet-31 Décembre*, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2014.

20 He welcomed Marshal Montgomery (UK) and General Juin (FR) in his command group. A. Juin, *Mémoires. Tome 2*, Fayard, Paris, 1960.

armed forces, budgetary constraints, and colonial wars.<sup>21</sup> With French officers absent, US working methods became central in the command structure while the increase in foreign military presence on French soil exacerbated tensions with the domestic population. These tensions, heightened by strikes and propaganda from the French Communist Party, generated hostility between French nationals and American soldiers. The slogan “US go Home!” notably emerged at that time.<sup>22</sup> The outbreak of the Suez Crisis in 1956 only worsened the already difficult relationship between France and the United States.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, the Fourth Republic's political turmoil revealed a “state anti-Americanism” characterised by France's distrust of the United States and perception that it would first and foremost defend its own supremacy. According to scholar Charles Cogan, counterweighting the United States then became an integral part of French political culture, as both countries had universalist aspirations.<sup>24</sup> Beyond these issues, the Fourth Republic proved an unstable regime plagued by ministerial crises and colonial uprisings. France's struggles in the Indochinese and Algerian wars and the failure of the European Defence Community in 1954 undeniably marked its decline on the international stage.

## Ending dependency: French grandeur without NATO

### *Sovereignty-building through disintegration*

In the late 1950s, France's deteriorating situation in its colonial war with Algeria prompted the fall of the Fourth Republic and Charles de Gaulle's return to power as the “providential man”. In June 1958, de Gaulle proposed a revision of the Constitution, approved by referendum three months later.<sup>25</sup> The French President's powers were considerably expanded by the new text, to the point that observers often describe this period as the birth of the “Republican Monarchy”. De Gaulle's interpretation of the Constitution and his exercise of power only reinforced this new presidential role – so much so that foreign

21 J. Raffik-Grenouilleau, *La quatrième république et l'alliance atlantique*, *op. cit.*

22 F. Jarraud, *Les Américains à Châteauroux: 1951-1967*, Jarraud, Arthon, 1981.

23 C. Mark, *The Suez crisis: American policy and the effect on NATO*, Library of Congress, Legislative Reference Service, Washington DC, 1967.

24 C. Cogan, *French negotiating behavior: dealing with la Grande Nation*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 2003.

25 C. de Gaulle, *Mémoires d'espoir*, Plon, Paris, 1999; Référendum sur la Constitution de 1958. Digithèque de matériaux juridiques et politiques, available at: <https://mjp.univ-perp.fr>

and defence policies became his uncontested *domaine réservé*.<sup>26</sup>

Backed by popular support and stronger institutions, de Gaulle monopolised foreign and defence affairs to fulfil his vision of *grandeur* on the international stage. When it came to NATO, this assertive policy materialised in a memorandum to US President Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan on September 17, 1958. With a more demanding tone than his predecessors, the President pressed for a tripartite directorate responsible for NATO reform and adaptation to the new security environment.<sup>27</sup> De Gaulle's meetings with his American and British counterparts, however, revealed profound disagreements on military integration within NATO. De Gaulle eventually decided to withdraw the French Mediterranean fleet from NATO command in 1959 and then from the North Atlantic fleet in 1963, moves that were direct consequences of the growing tensions between France and its major partners.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, France's assertive role through the personality of de Gaulle characterised the early years of the Fifth Republic. Benefiting from the onset of *les trente glorieuses*, a thirty-year period of strong economic growth, the President initiated a successful economic recovery and put an end to France's external debt.<sup>29</sup> He also relaunched France's nuclear weapons programme initiated under the Fourth Republic, which eventually brought France into the nuclear club with the detonation of its first atomic device in 1960.<sup>30</sup> De Gaulle therefore enjoyed a more enviable bargaining position than the successive governments of the Fourth Republic when he expressed his desire to remove France from the military command of the Alliance a few years later.

Following his successful election to a second mandate in 1965, de Gaulle held a press conference on February 21, 1966, in which he announced France's complete withdrawal from the NATO military structure while maintaining its Allied status. He justified his decision by pointing to the impossibility of NATO reform and the attitude of the United States.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to US President Lyndon B. Johnson, the French President stated:

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26 P. Raynaud (ed.), *L'esprit de la V<sup>e</sup> république. L'histoire, le régime, le système*, Éditions Perrin, Paris, 2017; D. Bellamy, "Le gaullisme fut-il une critique du régime d'Assemblée?", *Revue d'histoire politique*, Vol.9, No.3 (Special Issue), 2013; S. Cohen, *La monarchie nucléaire: les confisques de la politique étrangère sous la V<sup>e</sup> république*, Hachette, Paris, 1986.

27 Letter and memorandum from General de Gaulle to General Eisenhower, 17 September 1958, CVCE.eu, available at <https://www.cvce.eu>

28 M. Vaisse, *La grandeur: politique étrangère du général de Gaulle (1958-1969)*, Fayard, Paris, 1998; C. Nuenlist, A. Locher, G. Martin, *Globalizing de Gaulle: international perspectives on French foreign policies, 1958-1969*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2010.

29 A. Bergeaud, G. Cette, R. Lecat, "Le produit intérieur brut par habitant sur longue période en France et dans les pays avancés: le rôle de la productivité et de l'emploi", *Economie et statistique*, 2014, No.474; S. Berstein, *La France de l'expansion – La République gaullienne 1958-1969*, Vol.1, Le Seuil, Paris, 1989; A. Pratte, *Les batailles économiques du général de Gaulle*, Plon, Paris, 1978.

30 B. Tertrais, J. Guisnel, *Le Président et la bombe*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2016.

31 Press conference, INA, 21 February 1996, available at <https://fresques.ina.fr>

France intends to recover the full exercise of its sovereignty over its territory, currently impinged by the permanent presence of allied military elements or by the routine use of its sky, to cease its participation in the “integrated” commands and to no longer place forces at NATO’s disposal.<sup>32</sup>

In the same vein, an *aide-memoire* issued in March 1966 to the fourteen Allies reaffirmed his decision and suggested a potential withdrawal from NATO’s Military Committee and Standing Group, a suggestion confirmed several days later.<sup>33</sup> Paradoxically, this decision became the occasion to finally transform the NATO Command structure. The June 7-8, 1966 NAC ministerial meeting led to the abolition of the Standing Group, the creation of an International Military Staff (IMS) to assist the Military Committee, and the relocation of SHAPE to Belgium, Allied Forces Central Europe to Germany, and the NATO Defence College to Italy.<sup>34</sup> The Allies later decided to utilize the Defence Planning Committee for military talks and to create a Nuclear Planning Group without French participation in both organs. Finally, the NAC and Military Committee moved to Belgium in late 1966.<sup>35</sup>

### ***The establishment of independent cooperation***

De Gaulle thought that *achieving independence* and *refusing alignment* were the two main pillars underpinning French *Grandeur* and erected them as immutable rules during his presidency.<sup>36</sup> However, his foreign policy did not aim to isolate France on the international stage. He maintained the country’s member status within the Atlantic Alliance and expressed *solidarity*, a third pillar of French foreign policy, with Allies several times during his mandate. He also preserved diplomatic and military agreements with West Germany and actively pursued international cooperation in bilateral and “mini-lateral” formats.<sup>37</sup>

De Gaulle’s three successors, Georges Pompidou (1969-1974), Valéry Giscard d’Estaing

32 Letter from Charles de Gaulle to Lyndon B. Johnson, CVCE.eu, 7 March 1966.

33 Memorandum from the French government to the fourteen representatives of NATO member states, CVCE.eu, 11 March 1966; Note No.44 for M. de Beaumarchais on the NATO military committee, Paris, 27 May 1966, withdrawal of France, in M. Vaïsse (ed.), *Documents diplomatiques français 1966, 1er Janvier-31 Mai*, Tome 1, P.I.E. Peter Lang, Brussels, 2006.

34 NATO, Final Communiqué, NAC in ministerial session in Brussels 7-8 June 1966, 08 December 2014.

35 A. Giglioli, *France’s withdrawal from the NATO command structure*, Master’s thesis funded by a NATO scholarship, CPEA, 1998-2000; M. Vaïsse, P. Melandri, F. Bozo (ed.), *La France et l’OTAN, 1949-1996*, *op. cit.*

36 C. de Gaulle, *Mémoires d’espoir*, *op. cit.*

37 M. Vaïsse, *La Grandeur*, *op. cit.*

(1974-1981), and François Mitterrand (1981-1995), did not question his legacy in foreign and defence affairs, especially regarding NATO and France's need to be free from foreign influence. Every attempt at rapprochement carefully avoided violating Gaullian principles and was little publicised to avoid drawing unwanted public attention. In this, French foreign and defence policy between the 1970s and the 1990s was overall marked by stability despite profound changes in the international system. All three Presidents sought to preserve and even further the foundation of this policy by developing France's nuclear arsenal and conventional forces.<sup>38</sup> They also refused reintegration into the NATO command structure as long as the organisation was perceived as structurally dominated by the United States.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the country neither participated in the NATO Integrated Communication System (NICS) nor in the joint acquisition of the Airborne Warning & Control System (AWACS) respectively in 1971 and 1978.<sup>40</sup>

All three Presidents also advocated for a third way between bloc politics and pursued a *détente* policy initiated by de Gaulle, although with little success. Of particular note was their opposition to the extension of NATO's activities and geographical scope, which they perceived as a way for the United States to deepen its dominance over an organisation that France could not control.<sup>41</sup> In a Gaullian *détente* scenario envisioned by French policymakers, the Atlantic Alliance and the Warsaw Pact were bound to weaken and ultimately disappear.<sup>42</sup> In reality, the United States and the USSR's own *détente* policies excluded France from their bilateral talks on arms control and nuclear deterrence.<sup>43</sup> Not only did France have no say in the matter, bloc politics instead flourished during this period.

While France's *détente* policy became obsolete with the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, its rhetoric survived to criticise the newfound global supremacy of the United States. Mitterrand notably expressed hostility towards NATO's 1991 Strategic Concept advanced by the United States and instructed his Defence Minister to practice an empty chair policy at the meetings of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council created the same

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38 M. Ali, "France and NATO: the gaullist legacy and roots of dispute", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, December 2012, Vol.2, No.24; M. Vaïsse, P. Melandri, F. Bozo (eds.), *La France et l'OTAN, 1949-1996*, *op. cit.*

39 A. Menon, *France, NATO, and the limits of independence 1981-97: the politics of ambivalence*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 2000.

40 M. Vaïsse, P. Melandri, F. Bozo (eds.), *La France et l'OTAN, 1949-1996*, *op. cit.*; J. Raffik, "François Mitterrand et l'Otan", *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 2011, Vol.101-102, No.1.

41 A. Menon, *op. cit.*; M. Vaïsse, C. Sebag, "France and NATO: an history", *Politique étrangère*, 2009, Vol.5 (Special Issue); R. Kuisel, *The French way: how France embraced and rejected American values and power*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2012.

42 M. Ali, *op. cit.*

43 A. E. Gfeller, "Imagining European identity: French elites and the American challenge in the Pompidou – Nixon Era", *Contemporary European History*, 2010, Vol.19, No.2.

year.<sup>44</sup> However, the new international order ultimately imposed itself upon France, which unwillingly witnessed the expansion of NATO's missions to Yugoslavia as the Balkan security situation deteriorated in south-eastern Europe.

The third pillar of the Gaullian posture in foreign and defence affairs – solidarity and cooperation with Allies – then rebalances this mixed assessment. In 1967, France initiated a closer cooperation with NATO's military organs through agreements concluded between French Chief of Defence Charles Ailleret and SACEUR Lyman Lemnitzer. In 1974, Giscard d'Estaing reinforced this relationship with new French-NATO agreements designed to extend the scope of French engagement in case of attack while maintaining non-automaticity and *ex-ante* presidential validation.<sup>45</sup> A series of technical arrangements also followed suit.<sup>46</sup> Besides, France pursued its participation in the NATO Air Defence Ground Environment (NADGE) system and contributed to the development of an Air Command and Control System (ACCS) without compromising its non-integrated status.<sup>47</sup>

When it came to demonstrating solidarity in quantifiable terms, France was one of the few Allies to spend three percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on its military, a requirement pushed by the United States in the face of the Soviet military threat.<sup>48</sup> Bolstered by its nuclear power status, France also expressed its discontent regarding the USSR's aggressive behaviour towards Europe, exemplified by Mitterrand's speech before the Bundestag in 1983 in which he denounced the Soviet deployment of medium-range ballistic missiles on the European continent: "The Soviet Union [installed] new three-head mobile missiles 'SS 20', with 5000 km range and increased accuracy. 5000 km range, enough to reach Europe, not enough to reach the American continent".<sup>49</sup> That same year, France expressed its goodwill in matters of Atlantic politics by hosting the first NAC meeting in Paris since 1966.<sup>50</sup>

France's significant contribution to Allied operations in former Yugoslavia (Bosnia-Herzegovina and then Kosovo) also proved its loyalty to the Alliance. Several French

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44 M. Vaisse, C. Sebag, *op. cit.*; R. Kuisel, *op. cit.*; A. Menon, *op. cit.*

45 J. Lecanuet, J-P. Bayle, J. Chaumont, J. Golliet, X. de Villepin, Report No.253 made on behalf of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Armed Forces Committee, mission carried out by the French Forces in Germany from 17 to 19 January 1989, Senate.

46 M. Vaisse, P. Melandri, F. Bozo (eds.), *La France et l'OTAN, 1949-1996*, *op. cit.*

47 A. Menon, *op. cit.*

48 Dépenses militaires (% du PIB) – France, Banque Mondiale, available at <https://donnees.banquemondiale.org>

49 Speech given to the Bundestag by President François Mitterrand, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Élysée Treaty, discussing Franco-German cooperation, European security and the European Economic Community, Bonn, 20 January. See also: A. Treacher, "New tactics, same objectives: France's relationship with NATO", *Contemporary Security Policy*, 1998, Vol.19, No.2.

50 NATO, Final Communiqué – NAC meeting in Ministerial session in Paris, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> June 1983, 8 December 2014, available at <https://archives.nato.int>

liaison officers were then positioned in the NATO military structure to monitor the implementation of NATO rules of engagement (RoE) in the Western Balkans. Despite this institutional tinkering, France was put in the strange position of “executing plans devised in a rather opaque and mysterious way because the country remained outside the command structure”.<sup>51</sup> This might explain why Mitterrand briefly considered a French reintegration into the military structure in the early 1990s.<sup>52</sup>

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51 Interview with a French general officer, Paris, 2018.

52 F. Bozo, “Sarkozy’s NATO policy: towards France’s Atlantic realignment?”, *European Political Science*, No.9, 2010.



## The return of the prodigal son or *enfant terrible*?

### *The conditions for reintegration*

In the late 1990s, President Jacques Chirac (1995-2007) reopened the topic of NATO reform with the aim of restoring France within a more Europeanised military structure.<sup>53</sup> As a sign of goodwill, the Chief of Defence and his Military Representative resumed attendance at Military Committee meetings and the Defence Minister at NAC ministerial meetings from 1995 onwards.

The French government presented this rapprochement as a pragmatic move motivated by the necessities of the era – without, however, questioning France's Gaullian heritage. Practically, it allowed French military officers to quietly return to the NATO military structure. This French presence was initially minimal but designed to grow if reforms followed French recommendations.<sup>54</sup>

However, NATO Southern Command quickly became a point of contention between President Chirac and President Clinton.<sup>55</sup> While conceding a large Europeanisation of the military headquarters, leadership of NATO Southern Command in Naples was a clear red line for the US President. According to a French general officer: “The United States stuck to the principle that the Southern Command was supposed to oversee the US Sixth Fleet, and its proximity to Israel was too sensitive”.<sup>56</sup> In light of this, Chirac eventually decided that the needed conditions were not present for France to resume its role in NATO's military structure, halting the reintegration process after the 1997 Madrid Summit. France's vocal opposition to the 2003 US military invasion of Iraq then further exacerbated the Franco-American feud.

Nonetheless, French-US collaboration did not entirely stop amid this transatlantic turmoil. The Bentegat-Jones agreement signed in March 2004 notably confirmed ongoing military cooperation between the two Allies. Because of France's leading operational role within NATO's framework, SACEUR General James Jones granted the country 110 positions in the military structure.<sup>57</sup>

53 J. Chirac, *Mémoires – Le temps présidentiel (Tome 2)*, Nil, Paris, 2011.

54 Interview with an international civil servant, Brussels, 2019.

55 J. Fitchett, “US and France face off on control of NATO Southern command”, *The New York Times*, 2 October 1996; T. Friedman, “A France bites dog story”, *The New York Times*, 1 December 1996.

56 Interview with a French general officer, phone call, 2021.

57 Interview with a French general officer, phone call, 2021.

Three years later, the election of Nicolas Sarkozy provided the impetus needed for France to finally reintegrate in the NATO Command structure. The new President offered a definite change of style, dropping the discrete, half-step policies of his predecessors in favour of an open push for French reintegration. Sarkozy now stated publicly that France was one of the most significant contributors to the Alliance both in terms of budget and operational contributions and as such ought to take back its whole place.<sup>58</sup> In other words, Sarkozy sought to break the *omertà* on France's quasi-integrated status within NATO. A 2008 French White Paper thus established the conditions of reintegration: the absence of automaticity regarding external interventions; the non-positioning of French forces under NATO command in peacetime; and French nuclear independence.<sup>59</sup> In this, Sarkozy wished to preserve de Gaulle's most crucial red lines *vis-à-vis* NATO. He also knew that these demands would be acceptable for Allies, which no longer questioned these principles.

Likewise, the objectives motivating reintegration were clear. Sarkozy sought to remove Allied doubts regarding France's intentions for NATO and to end accusations that France harboured a hidden agenda. According to his public rhetoric, fully reintegrating into NATO was the only way to revive collective European defence and balance US dominance within NATO. He also wished for an increased French influence over NATO military doctrine by obtaining high-ranking positions in the command structure. Finally, Sarkozy was convinced that France could exercise greater pressure for NATO reform within NATO structures.<sup>60</sup> This tactical shift can also be explained by the gradual restructuring of NATO's military organs after the allied operations in Afghanistan and the Balkans, which reassured France about its room for manoeuvre once inside. No longer the "monolithic block" of the Cold War, the NATO command structure was lighter and more flexible than before.<sup>61</sup> Thus, following Allied and national consultations on reintegration, France's return to the NCS was officialised at the Strasbourg/Kehl Summit in April 2009.

### *An enduring Gaullian agenda*

If a change in style definitely occurred, Sarkozy's decision did not break with the Gaullian orthodoxy in NATO affairs. Indeed, the normalisation debate was plagued by political

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58 Closing speech by President Nicolas Sarkozy, in "Actes de la journée d'étude du 11 mars 2009: La France, la défense européenne et l'OTAN au 21ème siècle", Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique, available at <https://www.files.ethz.ch>

59 *Défense et sécurité nationale, Le Livre Blanc*, Odile Jacob, Paris, 2008.

60 Press conference by French President Nicolas Sarkozy in Lisbon, Portugal, discussing NATO, financial difficulties within the European Union, and Bulgarian/Romanian participation in the Schengen Zone, available at <https://www.elysee.fr>

61 Interview with a French senior civil servant, Paris, 2018.

disputes that distorted the consequences of reintegration for France.<sup>62</sup> From the Elysée Palace to the French delegation at NATO Headquarters, French actors remain the “guardians” of Gaullian orthodoxy, tasked with correcting any “deviant” behaviour from either the organisation or other Allies. As a senior official stressed, the Gaullian posture is “written into the DNA of French diplomats and officers working at NATO”.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the three precepts guiding contemporary French foreign and defence policy within NATO remain national autonomy, non-alignment, and solidarity.

First, French national autonomy is affirmed through an independent nuclear deterrent, which maintains France’s “rank” within NATO.<sup>64</sup> A corollary of autonomy is political control, which extends from political to military matters and underlies a systematic national oversight of the Alliance’s activities.<sup>65</sup> In the same vein, French stakeholders are particularly attentive to the human, material, and financial resources of the Alliance. Since the country has built its own defence system almost entirely independently from NATO, its representatives seek to avoid expenditure they consider superfluous.<sup>66</sup> A last type of control exerted by France on NATO concerns its missions and geographical scope. As a result, NATO is often thought of as a tool of last resort after considering the national, coalitional, and EU options.<sup>67</sup>

The second precept guiding French stakeholders is non-alignment with the United States. France’s “cartesian mindset” and its global vocation are often mentioned by French stakeholders to justify this peculiar stance within NATO.<sup>68</sup> In the opinion of a French diplomat, “it is historical, political, and maybe a bit cultural too, but we have no trouble saying no to the United States where many of our Allies do not have this culture. [...] we can very well put our foot in it when our Allies tend to seek a compromise, propose alternative solutions [...] We rather say no and block a committee”.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, French stakeholders still

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62 For a thorough assessment of these debates, see: F. Ostermann, *Security, defense discourse and identity in NATO and Europe: how France changed foreign policy*, Routledge, Oxon, 2018.

63 Interview with an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019).

64 Interviews with a French general officer (Mons 2019), a French general officer (Paris 2018), a French MoD official (Paris 2018), a French senior diplomat (Brussels 2019), a French senior military officer (Washington 2019), a French general officer (Brussels 2019), and international civil servants (Brussels, 2019).

65 Interviews with a French general officer (Mons, 2019), French diplomats (Brussels, 2019), an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019), French military officers (Brussels, 2019), a French general officer (Brussels, 2019), and a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

66 Interviews with a French general officer (Mons, 2019), French military officers (Brussels, 2019), French diplomats (Brussels, 2019), and international civil servants (Brussels, 2019).

67 Interviews with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), international civil servants (Brussels, 2019), and a French general officer (Paris, 2018).

68 Interviews with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), and a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

69 Interview with a French diplomat (Washington 2019).

perceive the Alliance as being structurally dominated by the United States, which seeks to impose its views on its evolution.<sup>70</sup> As stated by another French diplomat: “There is a lingering distrust *vis-à-vis* an international organisation assumed to be under total American influence”.<sup>71</sup> Every time the US pushes a topic within NATO, France adopts a cautious approach during negotiations to avoid leading the Alliance towards unwanted missions or areas.<sup>72</sup>

Finally, France unambiguously expresses solidarity with Allies in both its discourse and actions.<sup>73</sup> Under the Fifth Republic, no French government has ever questioned France’s Allied status nor suggested a complete withdrawal from NATO. The French vision of solidarity nonetheless differs from that of the United States, especially regarding the burden-sharing effort. French stakeholders advocate for national and European efforts to bolster Allied defence and accuse the United States of using NATO as an “outlet” for its defence industries: “We tend to say: to spend European money more efficiently, let us do European projects in the industrial field. The issue is that our major partner is telling us to buy American, so that everyone will have the same thing”.<sup>74</sup>

France’s tripartite policy approach produces corresponding logics and working methods for influencing NATO’s decision-making process; Gaullian orthodoxy translates into Gaullian practices, observable both during official debates and informally in the halls of the Alliance and behind closed doors. First, France pursues an *attendance policy* that few Allies have the means to sustain: “We are required to attend all meetings. Otherwise, someone replaces us with language elements”, one French military officer noted.<sup>75</sup> This policy allows France to monitor every decision and ensure they correspond to French views. Another practice includes the use and defence of the French language in NATO affairs (one of the Alliance’s two official languages) which constitutes a perpetual effort. French delegates are careful to protect this privilege by acting as “watchdogs” that rectify any failure to uphold full bilingualism within NATO.<sup>76</sup> The running order of speakers is another essential aspect when studying French statements in working groups and committees. Traditionally, France is among the first countries to speak in high-level meetings, which reflects its perceived rank in international affairs.

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70 Interviews with international civil servants (Brussels, 2019).

71 Interview with a French senior diplomat (Paris 2018).

72 This was notably the case for China and the 5G issue during the fieldwork of the author: ethnographic notes, 25, 29 March; 1, 9, 11, 15 April; 1, 15 July 2019.

73 Interviews with a French general officer (Paris, 2018), and an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019).

74 Interview with a French general officer (Paris, 2018).

75 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

76 Interview with a member of the French delegation to NATO (2019).

France equally stands out as one of the most proactive countries during formal negotiations. French delegates intervene almost systematically and often produce a large number of commentaries.<sup>77</sup> Making its voice heard allows France to control the structure of debates and avoid unwanted developments, as decisions must be reached by consensus and thus consider French comments.<sup>78</sup> French representatives also distinguish themselves from their counterparts by extensively relying on agreed language while monitoring “deviations” from official language elements during negotiations. To do so, they invoke two types of agreed language: that of the Alliance and that of French national legislation and policy documents.<sup>79</sup>

Finally, France does not hesitate to break the silence whenever it disagrees with a text put under the silence procedure. It is one of the Allies that has most used this tactic within NATO. According to an international civil servant, “there have been 72 breaks of silence in the Military Committee since 2015, including 22 French ones”.<sup>80</sup> Despite a lack of statistics on the civilian side, a senior official confirmed this trend and argued that France broke the silence the most, alongside the United States and Turkey.<sup>81</sup> This observation confirms the existence of an informal hierarchy of states within NATO. Indeed, most Allies are reluctant to break the silence because they are unwilling to put their capital in a delicate position *vis-à-vis* the Alliance.<sup>82</sup>

Outside the negotiation table, France stands out for its participation in the most influential informal groupings within NATO – the P3, Quad, and Quint. The P3 (France, United States, United Kingdom) brings together the Alliance’s nuclear countries to discuss deterrence issues. France is particularly attached to this cenacle due to its absence from the Nuclear Planning Group.<sup>83</sup> For its part, the Quad (the P3 and Germany) meets at every level, from Heads of State and Government to political advisors, and addresses all topics of interest to NATO. According to a foreign official, “they are the most important shareholders of the organisation”, thus corroborating the hierarchy described above.<sup>84</sup>

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77 Interviews with French military officers (Brussels, 2019), a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a French ex-defence minister (Brussels, 2019), a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a French general officer (Brussels, 2019), an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019), a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

78 Interviews with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019), a military advisor at the French delegation (2019), Ethnographic notes, 7 May, 17 June 2019.

79 Ethnographic notes, 3, 8, 23, 26, April 2019.

80 Informal talk with an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019). Ethnographic notes, 22 May 2019.

81 Interview with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019).

82 Interview with a retired senior US Department of State official (Washington, 2019).

83 Interview with a French diplomat (Washington, 2019).

84 Interview with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019).

Finally, the Quint (the Quad and Italy) deals with issues related to the Balkans region and mostly meets at the military level today. Quint members also meet outside NATO (from the advisors to the ministers' level) and sometimes include Russia in their talks, at which point it is called the "contact group".<sup>85</sup>

Following the same line of thought, the country enjoys privileged access to and relationships with the international civilian staff thanks to the attribution of key posts to French nationals. According to a French official, "we maintain the closest possible contacts, and not only with French people, to make sure that we see the projects beforehand and propose potential amendments to these papers. It provides information on both the ideas that circulate amongst the staff and the dynamics of the structure".<sup>86</sup> France is considered a crucial interlocutor and is often consulted for its position on draft documents or invited to participate in restricted meetings with other Allies.<sup>87</sup> If the country also possesses high-ranking military positions in the NCS, such as Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (SACT) and Vice-Chief of Staff (VCOS), it nevertheless suffers from a sub-optimal presence in lower levels of the NCS and the International Military Staff, thus limiting its ability to influence documents during early drafting phases, before their negotiation in working groups and committees.<sup>88</sup>

### *The emergence of a "positive agenda" for NATO*

Alongside these Gaullian mindset and practices, one can note the gradual emergence of a more favourable attitude among French policymakers working on NATO affairs. Over the past decade, they have been able to reflect on France's NATO policy and observe the misdeeds of an overly rigid and reactive posture, which tends to antagonize other Allies. If the Gaullian orthodoxy remains a vital component of French identity, French policymakers now also believe in the benefits of developing a "positive agenda" for the Alliance.<sup>89</sup> They thus push for France to become a driving force within NATO as a way to better guarantee French and European security.

Accordingly, French policymakers have developed a set of proactive influence strategies,

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85 The Contact Group, *US Department of State*, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov>

86 Interview with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

87 Ethnographic notes, 22 March, 27 May 2019. Interviews with a French ex-defence minister, (Brussels, 2019), and a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019).

88 This assessment relies on a detailed analysis of the positioning of French officers within NATO carried out in C. Calmels, *Influence in a Military Alliance*, *op. cit.*

89 Interviews with a French diplomat (2019), a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021), a French general officer (Mons, 2019), and a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

which is the practical consequence of the emerging “positive agenda” mindset. For instance, France has put more efforts into writing so-called “food-for-thought” papers ahead of NATO debates in recent years.<sup>90</sup> As an international civil servant puts it:

In 2009, France was systematically reactive and could not write food-for-thought papers. There was no background knowledge nor any willingness to consolidate positions jointly. Today, France is teaming with other countries to produce food-for-thought papers and revive debates. This is due to a better knowledge of the Alliance, better inter-ministerial coordination in Paris, and a desire to be more proactive within NATO.<sup>91</sup>

The years 2013 and 2014 constituted a turning point in this regard.<sup>92</sup> Since then, France has produced or co-signed food-for-thought papers on varied topics, such as cyber issues, institutional adaptations, NATO-EU cooperation, Russia, the enhanced Forward Presence, the NATO mission in Iraq, anti-access/area-denial, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and NATO's 360-degree approach.<sup>93</sup> The country has also understood the need to select and federate Allies around its ideas: “It always has less weight when you are alone”, said one French diplomat; “to take the example of the food-for-thought paper on decision-making, we had the Benelux countries with us. This group weighs in because they are historical and Atlanticist Allies, which helps dispel the caricatured image France might have”.<sup>94</sup>

Since 2009, France has also developed another influence tactic which can be described as nuclear pedagogy. This approach starkly contrasts with the pre-2009 period, during which France mostly discussed nuclear issues with its P3 counterparts. According to a French senior diplomat:

I would say that there has been an evolution in the sense that, little by little, we became more comfortable with the idea of promoting our nuclear culture in NATO. It was obvious that joining the NPG was not

90 “Food for Thought papers” are informal documents produced by one or several nations to share their stance on a topic or put a topic on NATO's agenda.

91 Interview with an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019).

92 Interviews with a French senior diplomat (Paris, 2019), an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019).

93 Ethnographic notes, 15 April 2019. Interviews with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019), a French senior diplomat (Paris, 2019), a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), and a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

94 Interview with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

an option. On the other hand, we were much more relaxed regarding nuclear issues in NATO as long as no action could limit or be perceived as limiting France's room for manoeuvre. With these two caveats, we have taken a more proactive stance from the 2010s onwards.<sup>95</sup>

This new approach also materialises in visits and briefings held in France and attended by key NATO officials, including NATO Permanent Representatives, their Deputies, the Military Representatives, and the Secretary General.<sup>96</sup> These meetings occur before summits or revisions of NATO's deterrence posture to influence nuclear debates in NATO. The publicised nature of the visits also reaffirms France's rank as a nuclear power with credible military capabilities.

Finally, France increasingly pushes niche topics on NATO's agenda, such as cyber- or space-defence, to brand itself as a technologically able nation, one eager to share its knowledge with NATO Allies and no longer a difficult partner resisting change. Toulouse will notably host NATO's new space Centre of Excellence after France won the call for proposal in January 2021.<sup>97</sup>

This change in behaviour can be interpreted as a way to anticipate and shape NATO debates according to France's interests by setting the agenda on specific topics for which it has a doctrinal or technological advantage over most Allies. Therefore, this new mindset should not be considered a deviation from the Gaullian mindset as they complement each other in the making of NATO policy. While the core belief in Gaullism remains unchanged, French practices have partially evolved thanks to the emergence of this peripheral belief in the need to develop a "positive agenda" for NATO. As such, having a reactive posture is no longer the sole option for French stakeholders since becoming more proactive within NATO is a way to better control its evolution. However, this "positive" evolution of French influence strategies is still limited today. As will be shown in the following case studies, the use of reactive influence strategies once the topics have already been put on NATO's agenda by the Allies remains the norm, thus generating mixed results in terms of influence.

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95 Interview with a French senior diplomat (Paris, 2019).

96 See: L. Verhaeghe, "Gérard Longuet et Anders Fogh Rasmussen en visite à l'Île Longue", *Ministère des Armées*, 1 September 2011; "La France invite ses alliés de l'OTAN dans le saint des saints nucléaire", *Le Monde*, 15 February 2020.

97 "Toulouse: l'Otan va installer un centre de formation et d'expérimentations dédié à l'espace", *Sud Ouest*, 5 February 2021.



## The NCS adaptation: containing the command structure expansion

Following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, eastern European Allies advocated expanding the NATO Command Structure (NCS)<sup>98</sup> and refocusing the Alliance's efforts on collective defence. For its part, France called for a "zero-growth" reform closely monitored by an external expert group. Its stance crystallised around the increase in the number of military officers and political control over SACEUR's activities and provoked heated talks during both military and political negotiations. Overall, France found itself isolated in these debates.

### The NAC mandate to NATO reform: maximalists versus minimalist France

The 2014 Ukraine crisis questioned the adequacy of the NCS, which was designed for out of area operations since the 1990s. For Allies like Poland and the Baltic States, the military structure required adaptation if it was to remain relevant in the face of the Russian threat.<sup>99</sup> Both the US and UK governments at the time were also "pushing NATO to do more".<sup>100</sup> These Allies were depicted during interviews as part of a "maximalist camp" supported by Allied Command Operations (ACO) and the International Staff.<sup>101</sup>

By contrast, France's heavy military involvement in the Sahel and other budgetary and

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98 The NATO Command Structure comprises the Alliance's multinational headquarters at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The two strategic commands are the Allied Command Operations (ACO) in Mons (Belgium) and the Allied Command Transformation (ACT) in Norfolk (United States).

99 Interviews with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), and a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019).

100 Interviews with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a diplomat from the French delegation to NATO (2019), and a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

101 Interviews with a foreign military officer (Paris, 2019), a senior US Department of Defence official (Washington, 2019), a former military advisor at the French delegation to NATO (2019), a French military officer (Brussels, 2019), and a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

human resources constraints left it in a delicate position. It struggled to send military officers to the NATO command structure, which was not considered a priority.<sup>102</sup> The country feared a quantitative expansion of the NCS that it could not contribute to and developed two narratives in response. First, it advocated for a zero-growth reform, knowing that this would most likely be unattainable.<sup>103</sup> Behind its rigid negotiating posture regarding the growth of the NCS, the French goal was to “set the bar high enough” from the start and then gradually move to a more consensual position with other nations.<sup>104</sup> Second, France increasingly depicted its military engagement on its Southern flank as contributing to the security of the Alliance.<sup>105</sup> Together with Spain, Greece, Portugal, and Italy, France thus formed a “minimalist camp” in the early debates on the NCS adaptation because of their shared focus on the terrorist threat emanating from the South.<sup>106</sup>

As the 2016 Warsaw summit drew closer, discussions on NATO adaptation in response to Russian military activities intensified. Norway gathered Iceland, the United Kingdom, and France to draft a food-for-thought paper proposing reform recommendations before the summit.<sup>107</sup> By participating in this initiative, France sought to influence the wording of the document and to send a positive signal that it supported an economically viable NCS reform.<sup>108</sup> The paper was eventually co-signed in June 2016 by the four states’ Defence Ministers and forwarded to Allied counterparts and the Secretary General.<sup>109</sup> A month later, Heads of State and Governments gathered in Warsaw for the NATO summit, where they mandated a functional assessment of the NCS.<sup>110</sup> If France refused to mention in the declaration that the NCS would “quickly fail” in the face of current challenges, it accepted the decision to review its structure.<sup>111</sup>

102 France was providing around seventy-five per cent of its share against the required ninety per cent or more provided by other nations. Interviews with French general officers (phone calls, 2021), French military officers (phone calls, 2021), a French defence official (phone call, 2021), a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021), a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019), and a French general officer (Paris, 2019).

103 Interviews with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019), a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019), and a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021).

104 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

105 Joint press conference by Manuel Valls and Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, Brussels, 18 March 2015, French Government’s official dailymotion account.

106 Interviews with a French general officer (phone call, 2021), a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019), a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019).

107 J. Ringsmose, S. Rynning, “Now for the hard part: NATO’s strategic adaptation to Russia”, *Survival*, Vol.59, No.3, 2017.

108 Interviews with a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

109 J. Ringsmose, S. Rynning, *op. cit.*

110 NATO, Warsaw Summit Communiqué, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Warsaw 8-9 July 2016.

111 Interview with a French defence official (phone call, 2021).

## A tedious functional assessment

### *The creation of a Senior Experts Group: a French input*

In the summer of 2016, Assistant Secretary General for Defence Policy & Planning (DPP) Heinrich Brauss led political talks in the DPP committee (DPPC) on the format of the NCS functional assessment. During this first negotiation phase, France drew on “smart defence” and the “persistent federated approach”, two concepts developed by French SACTs to promote the idea of a “smart NCS” that Allies could quickly reinforce in times of crisis (as opposed to permanently operating with a larger, less nimble structure).<sup>112</sup> French representatives also took this opportunity to propose the creation of a Senior Experts Group (SEG), conceived as an external “watchdog” that would advise the Strategic Commands and even challenge their conclusions.<sup>113</sup> France drafted a food-for-thought paper on the issue that was co-signed by the UK, Canada, Germany, Spain, and Estonia. On the other hand, most central and eastern European Allies opposed the idea, instead preferring “unfettered military advice” from the Supreme Commanders.<sup>114</sup>

These DPPC discussions eventually produced political guidance given by Defence Ministers to NATO military authorities during their gathering in Brussels on October 26-27, 2016.<sup>115</sup> Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on this occasion, “we have decided to assemble a Senior Experts Group to support the Supreme Commanders in assessing the effectiveness of the NATO Command Structure”.<sup>116</sup> The French proposal undeniably won out against eastern European Allies’ preference for the Supreme Commands to carry out their assessment without the SEG’s external advice. The SEG was appointed in November 2016 and included high-ranking military officers and senior defence officials, which helped establish the new body’s credibility in the eyes of the SACEUR and SACT.<sup>117</sup> France

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112 The “smart defence” initiative was launched at the 2012 Chicago Summit in a context of financial crisis to improve defence spendings and coordinate multinational projects to avoid duplications. For its part, the “persistent federated approach” emerged in 2017 to connect the NATO command and force structures more closely, more flexibly, and more persistently. Interviews with a French general officer (Paris, 2018), a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019).

113 Interviews with a French defence official (phone call, 2021), and a French military officer (phone call, 2021), and a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

114 Interviews with a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021), and a French general officer (Paris, 2019).

115 J. Ringsmose, S. Rynning, *op. cit.*

116 NATO, Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council at the level of NATO Defence Ministers, 26 October 2016.

117 General Knud Bartels (Denmark), General Vincenzo Camporini (Italy), Political director Lodewijk Casteleijn (Netherlands), Major General Neeme Väli (Estonia), Ambassador Alexander Vershbow (United States), Lieutenant General Michel Yakovleff (France), and Vice-Admiral Peter Hudson (United Kingdom) were nominated to be part of the SEG. Interviews

recommended the nomination of French General Michel Yakovleff, former Vice-Chief of Staff at SHAPE, to the group.<sup>118</sup> A former advisor at the French delegation to NATO explained the proposal's logic:

It was a major influence effort directed towards Heinrich Brauss thanks to our French integrated personnel in DPP. They convinced him that the SEG required a French national and that it was in his interest to nominate General Yakovleff because he had a deep knowledge of NATO and a critical insight that would not necessarily follow the French views. It was a win-win proposal.<sup>119</sup>

The chief objective was to position an individual knowledgeable on the French posture to help France retrieve first-hand information on the functional assessment process. The International Staff ultimately welcomed this proposal and offered Danish General Knud Bartels to chair this consultative format.<sup>120</sup>

SACT General Denis Mercier quickly recognised the SEG's ability and praised its capacity to deliver pertinent advice: "They were of unwavering support, challenged us whenever necessary, and brought additional credibility to our recommendations", said one official from ACT.<sup>121</sup> Contacts remained more limited with SACEUR General Curtis Scaparrotti, who was eager to preserve his freedom of action.<sup>122</sup> As for the Allies, SEG members divided among themselves the nations with which they would maintain the most contacts.<sup>123</sup> When looking more specifically at its relationship with France, General Yakovleff and General Bartels were in touch with the two military delegations to NATO commands and the delegation to NATO Headquarters during consultations.<sup>124</sup>

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with an international civil servant (phone call, 2021), a French defence official (phone call, 2021), a foreign general officer (Brussels, 2019), and a French general officer (Paris, 2019).

118 Interviews with a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021), a French general officer (phone call, 2021), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

119 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

120 Interviews with a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021), and a foreign general officer (Brussels, 2019).

121 Interview with a French general officer (Paris, 2018).

122 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

123 Interview with a foreign general officer (Brussels, 2019).

124 Mainly the Ambassador, the Military Representative, and the military officer and diplomat working on the NCS adaptations. Interviews with French general officers (phone calls, 2021) and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

## *The disagreement over the resource gap*

To prepare the bi-Strategic Command report (as it was referred to at the time), General Mercier and General Scaparrotti worked with their military staff to identify their resource needs and establish close bilateral contacts.<sup>125</sup> While both agreed on the need to reinforce the NCS, their methodology and resource requirements differed significantly. Several French stakeholders argued that ACT had developed an overview of its needs that remained within reasonable limits.<sup>126</sup> SACT expressed his vision for the NCS: “My headquarters will try to push more flexibility in the command structure and more linkage with national command structures”.<sup>127</sup> SACT and his staff knew France’s red lines on NATO’s expansion when evaluating ACT needs.<sup>128</sup> Besides, the country maintained regular contact with ACT in order to stay informed on its evaluation process and to ensure that ACT’s demands remained acceptable. As several Allies questioned ACT’s legitimacy compared to ACO, it was important to prevent ACT from becoming a target or a “means of blackmail” used against France during negotiations.<sup>129</sup>

By contrast, SHAPE took longer to initiate the functional assessment process while SACEUR did not share the same commitment to NATO reform, especially since he rarely visited NATO Headquarters.<sup>130</sup> As such, the SEG intervened to “pressurize” SHAPE to align with ACT’s work.<sup>131</sup> ACO eventually identified severe shortages of military officers but failed to deliver a fine-grained analysis of its needs. According to a French official: “We had internal sources telling us that it had been done very roughly and was overestimated because of previous reform experiences”.<sup>132</sup> During this evaluation process, the French Permanent and Military Representatives wrote open letters to SACEUR and visited SHAPE in Mons, Belgium several times.<sup>133</sup> In their encounters with SACEUR and the Chief of

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125 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

126 Interviews with a French general officer (Paris, 2019), a French general officer (Mons, 2019), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

127 J. Barnes, “Senior NATO General says Alliance working on modernization, efficiencies”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 January 2017.

128 Interviews with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), and a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019).

129 Interviews with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019), a French general officer (Paris, 2018), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

130 Interviews with a foreign general officer (phone call, 2021).

131 Interviews with a French general officer (Paris, 2019), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

132 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

133 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

Staff, they repeatedly stressed the need for a zero-growth adaptation.<sup>134</sup>

Once the evaluation phase was completed, ACO led the final compilation of the bi-Strategic Command report and its cover letter. ACT was nonetheless able to partially influence the letter's wording. According to a French military officer: "I remember the draft cover letter taking stock of the strategic situation. In this four-page document, Russia appeared ninety-three times. It was a completely Russia-centric piece that did not address the South, barely terrorism, and barely the 360-degree approach. The document was modified because the French General here said 'no way!'"<sup>135</sup> Following these last adjustments, the Supreme Commanders presented their report to the Allies during a December 2016 NAC meeting. The SEG report delivered a few weeks later broadly concurred with the observations made in the bi-Strategic Command document.<sup>136</sup> For its part, France deemed the report problematic because it declared the NCS "not fit for purpose" based on insufficient analysis of its actual needs.<sup>137</sup>

Considering Paris's rigid posture on numbers, French delegates kept defending the zero-growth option in military meetings.<sup>138</sup> The country notably confronted Poland during discussions leading to the Chiefs of Defence's military advice on the functional assessment of the NCS on January 17-18, 2017.<sup>139</sup> France then received little open support during DPPC negotiations, even though some Allies who were also struggling to meet military resource needs seemed to share France's stance informally.<sup>140</sup> Moreover, the country felt pressured by the tight timeframe leading to the February 15-16, 2017 Defence Ministerial meeting.<sup>141</sup> On this occasion, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves le Drian restated the principles governing France's NATO policy: "the Allies must invest for their own security, following their commitments, and not encourage common funding to free themselves from the expenses that each could incur in other operational frameworks".<sup>142</sup> The meeting eventually concluded with the Defence Ministers' agreeing on the functional assessment

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134 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

135 Interview with a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019).

136 Interview with a foreign general officer (Brussels, 2019).

137 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

138 Interviews with a French defence official (phone call, 2021), a French general officer (phone call, 2021), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

139 Interview with French military officers (phone calls, 2021). See also: "From Warsaw Summit to Brussels Summit, NATO Chiefs of Defence discuss ongoing work", US Mission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 19 January 2017, available at <https://nato.usmission.gov>; NATO; "176<sup>th</sup> Military Committee in Chiefs of Defence Session – NATO Headquarters, Brussels, Belgium", 17-18 January 2017, available at <https://www.nato.int>

140 Interview with a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021).

141 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

142 "NATO: defence ministers meeting (15-16 February 2017)", *Ministère des Armées*, 21 March 2017.

and launching the recommendation phase.<sup>143</sup> In exchange for its approval, France obtained the reappointment of the SEG in its advisory functions for the second phase of the NCS reform. According to a French official: “The question was whether the SEG would be involved in the second phase. France pushed hard for this to happen, while the Poles were not favourable to the idea. The decision to renew it was finally taken at the [2017] February ministerial meeting”.<sup>144</sup>

## **The recommendation phase: towards an enhanced command structure**

### *France questions the first report*

In the following months, SACT Mercier and SACEUR Scaparrotti engaged in the second phase of the NCS reform, which involved preparing their recommendations for the new structure. During this phase, French representatives in Paris and Brussels initiated talks with ACT and ACO on three major topics of interest: the task redefinition of the two Strategic Commands, the distinction between peacetime, crisis, and war, and the human and material reinforcement of the NCS.

Regarding the jurisdictions of each Strategic Command, SACT and SACEUR negotiated the mutual exchange of several competencies. According to a French officer then assigned to ACT, “we took back important things, such as the entire capability spectrum and relationship with the industry, because capability management was suffering from fragmented governance and process. The implementation of the exercises was entrusted to ACO, while ACT kept the design of their scenarios in the Stavanger Joint Warfare Centre”.<sup>145</sup> At the time, SACEUR wanted the exercises to display NATO deterrence and defence capabilities, and SACT was keen to clarify the responsibilities of his command, which were not easily understood by Allies.<sup>146</sup> This exchange of responsibilities was SACT’s personal decision and not dictated by any Parisian request that aroused conflicting reactions from French

143 NATO, “NATO Defence Ministers take steps to strengthen the Alliance”, 16 February 2017.

144 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021). Two other interviewees shared this observation: a French military officer (phone call, 2021) and a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021).

145 Interview with a French officer (Paris, 2018).

146 Interviews with a French military officer (Norfolk, 2019), a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019). The other logic underpinning this transfer was General Mercier’s willingness to ensure the link with the EU on capability issues, considering recent developments in this area.

stakeholders.<sup>147</sup> Some interlocutors notably underlined that giving up the exercises bore the risk of further disconnection between ACT and NATO Headquarters.<sup>148</sup>

France was equally wary that the August 2017 bi-Strategic Command recommendations report would suppress the distinction between peacetime, crisis, and war. In this document, military requirements were based on “baseline activities and current operations” (BACO), conceived as a time when NATO maintains a reinforced deterrence and defence posture that can quickly ramp up to a crisis stage and then a “maximum level of effort” (MLE).<sup>149</sup> On this subject, a former French military advisor at the French delegation to NATO remarked:

We could not erase these terms during negotiations, but we clarified that these were intensities of activity and by no means legal states. We did not want their use to overshadow peacetime, crisis, and war, nor did we want them to correspond precisely to each time. We thus put the words peace, crisis, and war back in the text and reformulated the concepts developed by SACEUR so that they could not contradict these times.<sup>150</sup>

During these specific negotiations, France was initially supported by southern European countries equally wary of direct confrontation with Russia. However, France rapidly found itself alone defending such a distinction against those Allies that viewed the concepts of peace, crisis, and war outdated in the current security environment.<sup>151</sup>

Another focal point of negotiations regarded manpower. As requested by several nations wary of financial drifts – namely, France, Portugal, Spain, and Italy – the bi-Strategic Command report proposed two options: one that would keep resources constant and one that would increase manpower. Both Commanders deemed the first option unfeasible and dismissed it in the report.<sup>152</sup> The second option offered an increase of 1,935 personnel that immediately encountered vocal French opposition.<sup>153</sup> The issue for France was not SACT’s demands, which it considered reasonable, but those of SACEUR,

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147 Interview with a French general officer (Paris, 2018).

148 Interviews with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019), a French general officer (phone call, 2021), and a French general officer (Paris, 2019).

149 Interview with a former military advisor at the French delegation to NATO (2021). The MLE is activated in case of a major conflict. See also: ACT, “SACT remarks at all hands”, 24 January 2018, available at <https://act.nato.int>

150 Interview with a former military advisor at the French delegation to NATO (2021).

151 Interview with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

152 Interviews with a French general officer (phone call, 2021), a former military advisor at the French delegation to NATO (2021).

153 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).



which it considered excessive.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, SACT proposed an increase of 123 posts in his command, or six per cent of the additional manpower asked in the bi-Strategic Command document.<sup>155</sup> On the other hand, France criticised ACO for lacking rigour in its needs assessment and for overstating figures. According to a French official, “when we visited NATO Headquarters, we were told that the expressed needs had been revised upwards by the upper echelons”.<sup>156</sup> French representatives nevertheless found themselves alone in their fight as several countries favoured personnel increases.<sup>157</sup> Knowing that it could not provide additional manpower – especially in highly specialised posts – France once again requested that the Supreme Commanders lower their requirements.<sup>158</sup> On September 15-17, 2017, the Supreme Commanders eventually briefed the Chiefs of Defence on NCS adaptation during a NATO military conference in Tirana, Albania, with the manpower issue still unresolved.<sup>159</sup>

## A dogmatic stance on manpower

Before the 2017 defence ministerial meeting, the French Defence Ministry internally assessed the range of increase scenarios acceptable for France and their potential impact on France’s posture within NATO. The French cabinet ultimately backed a proposal for 1,000 new positions, the option it considered the most reasonable.<sup>160</sup> In view of the uncertainties surrounding France’s 2017 military planning law, French negotiators in Brussels were nonetheless instructed to leave these figures undisclosed and continue demanding a reduction on proposals for additional staff during negotiations.<sup>161</sup>

During the ministerial meeting itself, Defence Ministers eventually agreed on “an outline design for an adapted NATO Command Structure”.<sup>162</sup> If they officially announced

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154 Interview with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

155 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

156 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019). A French general officer (Brussels, 2019) shared this observation.

157 Interview with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

158 Interview with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

159 “NATO Military Committee Conference – Tirana, Albania”, 15-17 September 2017; “Press statement by the Chairman of the Military Committee, General Petr Pavel at the joint press conference following the NATO Military Committee Conference in Tirana, Albania”, 16 September 2017, available at <https://www.nato.int>

160 Interviews with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), and a French senior civil servant (phone call, 2021).

161 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

162 NATO, “NATO Defence Ministers agree to adapt command structure, boost Afghanistan troop levels”, 9 November

the creation of new commands, no figure was mentioned at the end of this meeting. France maintained pressure over the following weeks through sustained interactions with NATO political and military authorities. The French Permanent Representative, Ambassador H el ene Duch ene, notably went to Mons and met with SACEUR in December 2017. She reiterated French red lines on political control, the balance between ACO and ACT, and additional manpower just before the delivery of the second bi-Strategic Command report.<sup>163</sup> Her demands were backed by strong support from the French Defence Minister, thus showing the exceptional homogeneity of the French posture from the administrative to the political level.<sup>164</sup> However, without objective arguments to justify this “dogmatic” stance on numbers, several French negotiators admitted difficulties in defending France’s position.<sup>165</sup> A former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO notably stated:

We played on the ambiguity because it was unspoken. It was suggested that an increase of 1,000 staff would be acceptable, but we could not justify the reasons for this threshold. We told the Supreme Commanders that they were not justifying their numbers enough, but it backfired.<sup>166</sup>

## **The final report: a hard-fought compromise on numbers**

In December 2017, the amended bi-Strategic Command report was distributed to the nations.<sup>167</sup> A French official confessed: “We understood that SACEUR ignored our messages. As of December 2017, the increase was still around 1,340. It led to difficult talks at the military and DPPC levels”.<sup>168</sup> In the ensuing meetings, French delegates thus restated their red lines on political control and manpower. On the first issue, a former military advisor to the French delegation to NATO explained:

We reintroduced the distinction between peace, crisis, and war and put political control in every page. [...] We did not feel much support

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2017.

163 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

164 Interview with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019).

165 Interviews with a French general officer (Brussels, 2019), a French military officer (phone call, 2021), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

166 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

167 Interview with a French general officer (Paris, 2018).

168 Interview with a former military advisor at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

from the other allies on this issue. By contrast, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, and the Polo-Balts felt it was up to SACEUR to judge the need to scale up the structure.<sup>169</sup>

The manpower issue remained the main point of contention between France, the structure, and other Allies – so much so, in fact, that it reached the highest political levels and generated difficult conversations between the Elysée Palace and the White House, which pressured France to accept the numbers between late 2017 and early 2018.<sup>170</sup> Additionally, in December 2017 NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg went to Paris to meet with the French President, the Defence and Foreign Ministers, and the Chief of Defence to discuss NATO adaptation.<sup>171</sup> On this occasion, Emmanuel Macron told Stoltenberg that he refused any increases that were uncorrelated from military needs, considering that he was elected as a reformer and that France already faced budgetary constraints.<sup>172</sup>

French delegates kept their rigid stance until the very eve of the defence ministerial meeting on February 15, 2018.<sup>173</sup> Consequently, the Defence Ministers agreed to launch the adapted command structure with its additional commands but delayed the decision on staff increases.<sup>174</sup> On February 21, 2018, General François Lecointre then publicly disclosed the number the French Defence Ministry had decided on back in November 2017: “NATO is calling for an increase of 1,280 personnel. We want to decrease this number. The Defence Minister mentioned an increase of 1,000 personnel”.<sup>175</sup> The French rigidity at this stage of the reform process once again caused tensions with SACEUR’s team. In April 2018, as the two Supreme Commanders were “stabilising the definitive need in personnel”, France remained the only nation left questioning the issue.<sup>176</sup>

Two months later, Defence Ministers met in Brussels and approved the definitive need

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169 Interview with a former military advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

170 Interviews with a French diplomat (Norfolk, 2019), and a senior US Department of Defence official (Washington, 2019).

171 NATO, “NATO Secretary General discusses Alliance’s continued adaptation with President Macron”, 18-19 December 2017.

172 Interview with an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019).

173 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

174 NATO, “NATO Defence Ministers take decisions to strengthen the Alliance”, 15 February 2018.

175 “Audition du général François Lecointre, chef d’étatmajor des armées, sur le projet de loi de programmation militaire. Compte rendu de la Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées”, *Assemblée Nationale*, 21 February 2018, available at <https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr>

176 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

in personnel, set at 1,231.<sup>177</sup> One officer remarked that France had reached its goal, since the increase comprised approximately 1,000 military officers paid by their country of origin and 200 civilian contractors paid by NATO common funding.<sup>178</sup> Heads of State and Government then endorsed this decision at the July 11-12, 2018, Brussels summit. They declared in the *Communiqué*: “We have [...] taken far-reaching decisions to adapt and strengthen the NATO Command Structure, the military backbone of the Alliance. [...] We have agreed an implementation plan, and we will substantially increase our military personnel contribution to set up the adapted NATO Command Structure” (Parag. 29).<sup>179</sup>

## Conclusion

Throughout the negotiation process, France remained at odds with Allies over NCS adaptation. Paris reluctantly engaged in negotiations and focused on critical concerns it tried to incorporate into the final settlement against a dominant coalition that opposed its views. Facing budgetary constraints, France refused any increase in personnel that could affect French military resources and their use in national and foreign theatres. France thus pushed for zero-growth reform, attempting to build support for its position amongst other Allies but with little success. As such, France progressively grew estranged from the other Allies over its hard line. The country nonetheless obtained the creation of a Senior Experts Group, an external watchdog intended to monitor the work of the Strategic Commands. France equally maintained close contacts with both its integrated personnel, which allowed it to retrieve advance first-hand information on draft documents, and with NATO authorities, which enabled Paris to lobby for its demands.

Overall, France opposed, blocked, and confronted NATO authorities and member states throughout the reform process. The country ultimately failed to deliver a sufficiently solid argument that committed Allies to the zero-growth reform option. In doing so, it often locked itself into a protest role. A foreign senior official said in that regard: “France was unable to persuade the other Allies. They burned quite a lot of bridges on this issue”.<sup>180</sup> Still, France successfully positioned itself as the Ally to convince for consensus in these

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177 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021); NATO, “Press conference by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg following the meeting of the North Atlantic Council (NAC) in Defence Ministers’ session”, 7 June 2018.

178 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

179 NATO, “Brussels Summit Declaration, issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Brussels 11-12 July 2018”, 11 July 2018 available at <https://www.nato.int>

180 Interview with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019).

negotiations. It eventually found a compromise with both the structure and other Allies, who reduced their ambitions in terms of additional manpower and incorporated French language elements regarding political control in key documents. In this, French influence throughout the reform process mainly utilized coercive negotiation strategies that contained the evolution of the NCS to limits acceptable to the country.



## The launch of eFP: defending a limited deployment in the East

In the wake of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, Central and Eastern European Allies advocated for an increased NATO military presence on their soil. For its part, France was cautious of additional eastward troop deployments, considering southern threats to be more important. Despite an initial reluctance, French officials eventually engaged in discussions with Allies by promoting a “tripwire” concept. In this, France’s approach to negotiations with Allies regarding the creation of what would eventually be called the enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) evolved from a position of rigidity to one of conditional alignment. Russia’s subsequent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked a further evolution in the French posture.

### The inevitable refocusing towards the East

In the context of the 2014 Ukraine crisis, the so-called “Bucharest Nine” format, which consisted of an informal grouping of Central and East European countries, pushed for an increased NATO presence on the eastern flank. These Allies stated in their first joint declaration, “we will actively contribute to shaping the Allied strategic response to the long-term security threats and risks we jointly face in the East”.<sup>181</sup> Their declaration was made against the backdrop of a hardened US stance towards Russia following the failure of the Obama administration’s “reset” policy with Russia.<sup>182</sup> According to a French diplomat:

The political-military structures of the Department of Defence and Department of State were made up of “Cold War heirs” convinced that NATO was a pillar of American security, and 2014 brought them back

181 “Nine Heads of State call on Alliance to ‘strengthen the Eastern flank of NATO’”, Atlantic Council, 4 November 2015. Its members are Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia.

182 M. Khalifazadeh, “The Obama administration’s Russia ‘reset’ policy and the southern Caucasus”, *Central Asia & the Caucasus*, Vol.15, 2014; M. Zygar, “The Russian reset that never was”, *Foreign Policy*, 2016.

to this Cold War pattern. I think it was also a response to the request of eastern European countries, particularly the Poles who had quite a few contacts in Washington. At the time, they were telling the United States that they could not count on the Europeans and an American presence was needed on their soil.<sup>183</sup>

For the United States, increasing its presence on the Alliance's eastern flank was seen as demonstrating strength to Russia and would respond to criticism expressed by Poland and the Baltic States that the United States was progressively disengaging from Europe.<sup>184</sup> US support first materialised in the European Reassurance Initiative (ERI) in 2014 and then in the Transatlantic Capability Enhancement and Training (TACET) initiative launched with Germany in June 2015 (later joined by the United Kingdom).<sup>185</sup>

## France's promotion of the tripwire concept

Contrary to its Quad partners, France remained cautious of new military activities eastward. This initial reluctance can be explained by the operational pressure it was experiencing in the Sahel, the Middle East, and its own national territory. According to a French military officer, "France was focused on the terrorist threat. The armed forces initially saw the strengthening of NATO's presence in the East as potentially diverting French forces that were already under strain".<sup>186</sup> Priority was thus given to national and coalitional engagements, exemplified by France's absence from most NATO operational activities since 2012.<sup>187</sup>

Diplomatically, France did not consider Russia a direct conventional military threat in the mid-2010s. As such, it engaged carefully in the post-Crimean *aggiornamento*. The country was notably worried about undermining nuclear deterrence and its then-balanced posture with Russia.<sup>188</sup> Nevertheless, a consensus progressively emerged in French political-military

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183 Interview with a former diplomat at the French delegation to NATO (phone call, 2021).

184 Interview with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021).

185 ERI is now known as the European Deterrence Initiative. See: "Developing modern defence capabilities: exercising a forward presence", Atlantic Treaty Association, 13 March 2018, available at <http://www.atahq.org>. "European Deterrence Initiative: the transatlantic security guarantee", European Parliament Think Tank, 9 July 2018, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>; "Defence Secretary announces more support in Baltics and Ukraine", UK Government, 8 October 2015, available at <https://www.gov.uk>

186 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

187 Interviews with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019), and a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

188 Interviews with a foreign senior official (Brussels, 2019), a French military officer (phone call, 2021), a French senior



circles regarding the need to participate in the future eFP on the eastern flank, both to show solidarity with Allies and to steer the decision-making process towards terms acceptable to France.<sup>189</sup>

France even demonstrated initiative by submitting in December 2015 a food-for-thought paper to Allies on deterrence.<sup>190</sup> This document sought to shape the debate by proposing a light military apparatus intended for political effect, in contrast to eastern Allies' proposal to position a volume of forces capable of denying Russian territorial gains. The "tripwire" mentioned in the document then referred to claymore mines triggered whenever someone trips on their cords. It was conceived to deter Russia from "tripping" on the "allied cord" and thus provoke an immediate NATO response.<sup>191</sup> France succeeded here in shaping the doctrinal foundations of the eFP. In the words of an international civil servant:

It was a very well-done job because it was done discreetly and thoughtfully. French officials worked closely with Heinrich Brauss to ensure that this idea was taken up by the papers produced at the DPP level. It was brilliant because it allowed France to get a result in line with what it wanted without appearing like a French idea.<sup>192</sup>

During negotiations in January and February 2016, France continued its influence work by narrowing the range of the debate. French negotiators notably pushed for limited, rotational, and voluntary military contributions in a restricted geographic area in order to stay in compliance with the NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>193</sup> In February 2016, Defence Ministers then agreed on the eFP, to be deployed along the Alliance's eastern flank. During the press conference announcing the decision, Secretary General Stoltenberg stated that the eFP would be "rotational and supported by a programme of exercises; and it will be complemented by the necessary logistics and infrastructure to support pre-positioning and facilitate rapid reinforcement".<sup>194</sup> It thus seems that French demands were heard, at least regarding the eFP's light, rotational character.

By actively participating in the agenda-setting of the issue, France sought to avoid

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diplomat (phone call, 2021), and a French general officer (Mons, 2019).

189 Interview with a French diplomat (phone call, 2021).

190 Interview with a French diplomat (2018).

191 Interviews with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021), a French diplomat (phone call, 2021), a French diplomat (2018), and a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

192 Interview with an international civil servant (Brussels, 2019).

193 Interview with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021).

194 NATO, "NATO boosts its defence and deterrence posture", 10 February 2016.

ostracization and to exert its influence early on over this new military activity. French efforts in demonstrating to Eastern European countries that Paris understood their security interests was also meant to encourage them to participate in its operations in the Sahel. Hence, refusing something that Eastern European Allies strongly demanded could prove counterproductive for France's interests.<sup>195</sup>

## Reluctant involvement in negotiations

### *France's moderating efforts at the military level*

In April 2016, SACT and SACEUR gave their advice to the Military Committee regarding the eFP. France considered their initial draft to be overly ambitious, with too much power delegated to SACEUR. Moreover, France opposed the inclusion of Poland as a host nation, considering the country less vulnerable to anti-access/area-denial strategies than the Baltic States.<sup>196</sup> French representatives thus pushed for Poland's removal from the document during ensuing negotiations. They also insisted on the voluntary, rotational, and non-permanent character of the eFP and that it be restricted to the land domain.<sup>197</sup> Finally, they adopted a hard stance on political control, as during the NCS adaptation. If it was well-understood that operational command would remain in the hands of each contributing nation, discussions proved more difficult on other aspects.<sup>198</sup> French representatives notably paid particular attention to the rules of engagement, with the aim of avoiding escalating tensions with Russia. They also refused any transfer of authority to SACEUR during peacetime.<sup>199</sup> A French official further explained:

We had to reaffirm the necessity to establish close political control over this activity and the accompanying strategic communication. We also requested that no transfer of authority be made to the host nation, but only to SACEUR for operational control and the framework nation for

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195 Interview with a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

196 Interviews with a French general officer (phone call, 2021), and a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021).

197 Interviews with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021), a French general officer (phone call, 2021), and a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

198 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

199 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

tactical control.<sup>200</sup>

Overall, France found itself isolated during these military negotiations. Meanwhile, Poland and the Baltic states were proactive and supported by the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada in the run-up to the 2016 Warsaw summit. The remaining countries constituted a sort of “soft underbelly” that mostly remained silent.<sup>201</sup> In late April, negotiations then crystallised over disagreement regarding Poland’s participation. The issue was ultimately deferred to the political level, given the deadlock at the military level.<sup>202</sup> A French diplomat suggested that France’s rigid stance in the Military Committee could be interpreted as a negotiation tactic intended to give the impression that it was making concessions at the political level, similar to what occurred during the NCS adaptation.<sup>203</sup>

### *From distinctness to conditional alignment with the Quad*

Following military talks, NATO’s Defence Policy and Planning (DPP) Division elaborated a draft politico-military advice it submitted to Allies in late-May 2016. The ensuing French negotiation strategy in DPPC meetings then comprised three main axes: the shaping of eFP so that it did not cross its red lines; the refusal to endorse a leadership role for itself; and the agreement to become a contributing nation. To shape this new military activity, French policymakers first undertook a communication campaign to publicly justify France’s refusal to place its armed forces under permanent NATO command. One can assume here that France was already considering participation in the eFP even if the specificities of its participation remained to be fixed. France insisted on maintaining its Command and Control (C2) chain and sought to preserve its “intangible military principles”. According to a French official, “the Allies were struggling to understand our C2, and the visits and briefings helped in that regard”.<sup>204</sup>

France also sought to shape the eFP by placing it within a *sui generis* category – namely, an “activity” rather than an “operation”.<sup>205</sup> French representatives first insisted that eFP was a peacetime deterrence effort and should be neither an operation nor a mission that

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200 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

201 Interviews with a French general officer (Mons, 2019), a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021), and French general officers (phone calls, 2021).

202 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

203 Interview with a former diplomat from the French delegation to NATO (2021).

204 Interview with a French diplomat (phone call, 2021).

205 Interview with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021).

would require designating Russia as an enemy.<sup>206</sup> The use of the term operation was thus politically costly and unacceptable compared to a less engaging format. The other Allies did not oppose the French proposal, considering that eastern European countries had already obtained their main demand: the deployment of Allied troops on their territories.<sup>207</sup>

The agreed format of the force – a battalion-size battlegroup – was left deliberately vague to favour consensus and give both framework and contributing nations leeway for their deployment in host nations.<sup>208</sup> Each framework nation was free to select the Allies with which it would co-deploy and determine the strength of their deployment.<sup>209</sup> That being said, with France facing a united US-Polish front regarding Poland's inclusion, French officials were forced to compromise and accept Polish participation as a host nation.<sup>210</sup>

Besides, France was the only Quad member refusing to become a framework nation despite its early involvement in crafting the eFP. A former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO noted, "Heinrich Brauss initially wanted France to be a framework nation. But we refused because it was difficult for us to agree to set up a land presence in the East".<sup>211</sup> In this, France undeniably distinguished itself from its major partners. A French official explained: "If we look at the current eFP apparatus, we have three of the four largest NATO Allies that are framework nations, and France is absent from it. Canada had to take its place, which shows that we were not totally in tune with the Quad".<sup>212</sup> During interviews, French representatives justified this choice by mentioning France's constrained budget and military fatigue, its operational priorities in France and Africa, or the fact that an eastern presence could increase tensions with Russia.<sup>213</sup> In sum, there was neither political ambition nor military willingness for France to become a framework nation in 2016.

A policy shift nevertheless occurred due to inter- and intra-ministerial negotiations within the French government. The Foreign Ministry initially aligned itself with the Joint Staff due to their shared interest in avoiding escalating tensions with Russia, but the newly created Directorate-General for International and Strategic Affairs (DGRIS) within the

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206 Interviews with a French general officer (phone call, 2021), and a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021), a French military officer (phone call, 2021), a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

207 Interview with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021), a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

208 Interviews with a French military officer (Mons, 2019), and a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

209 Interview with a French military officer (Brussels, 2019).

210 Interview with a French senior diplomat (phone call, 2021).

211 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).

212 Interview with a French military officer (phone call, 2021).

213 Interviews with French military officers (Brussels, 2019), and a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

Defence Ministry displayed a more proactive stance regarding the eFP.<sup>214</sup> Defence civilians insisted that France should participate to avoid isolation and show solidarity with eastern Allies. They were also eager to increase their directorate's decision-making role within the Defence Ministry. The Quai d'Orsay then progressively hewed to the DGRIS proposal. At the same time, a group of French military officers published an internal report highlighting the potential benefits of eFP participation for the Army.<sup>215</sup> A French General remarked:

Surprisingly enough, a military study produced by Paris indicated that it was interesting for the armed forces to participate in eFP, given the training and deployment opportunities that would allow us to maintain our know-how at the upper end of the spectrum. It was the opportunity that created the political will rather than the opposite. We had not yet decided to send soldiers before this study, even though we did not have a clear stance on the matter.<sup>216</sup>

Following presidential approval to become a contributing nation, it was decided to position French soldiers and capabilities in Estonia and Lithuania, under the British and German leaderships, respectively, to increase political contacts and military interoperability with all four.<sup>217</sup> More specifically, France was keen to deepen its political-military relationship with Estonia, considering its early engagement in French operations in Africa at a time when only a few European countries were supporting France in the region.<sup>218</sup> To sum up, the French posture evolved considerably during the negotiations for the eFP, thanks both to a series of compromises reached with Allies and the launch of a governmental reflection process analysing French interests in the eFP.

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214 The DGRIS was created in 2015 and replaced the *Délégation aux Affaires Stratégiques* (DAS).

215 Interview with a French diplomat (phone call, 2021).

216 Interview with a French general officer (Mons, 2019).

217 Interviews with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019), and a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

218 Interview with a French senior diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

## The launch of the eFP: maintaining one's rank and showing solidarity

### *France as a contributing nation*

Negotiations for the eFP occurred rapidly as Defence Ministers endorsed the new battlegroups on June 14-15, 2016. Jens Stoltenberg declared on this occasion: "NATO will deploy by rotation four robust multinational battalions to Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. And I welcome the commitments made by many Allies today to contribute".<sup>219</sup> The media then gave further details regarding the framework nations. The UK would lead the eFP in Estonia, the United States in Poland, Germany in Lithuania, and Canada in Latvia.<sup>220</sup> Interestingly, both the UK Defence Secretary and Polish Permanent Representative emphasized the eFP's "deterrent effect" by acting as a "tripwire", dismissing its ability to defend an "entire theatre" during their respective press conferences.<sup>221</sup> It thus seems that they appropriated, at least publicly, the language elements disseminated by French delegates from the outset of negotiations. With regards to France, President Hollande declared on July 9, 2016 at the Warsaw summit: "There will be this enhanced Forward Presence, and France will participate in it. The deployment will take place from 2017 within the framework of a company, once a year in Estonia with our British friends; and then the following year, in 2018, with Germany in Lithuania as part of the Franco-German brigade".<sup>222</sup> Such a contribution was made possible by the inclusion of key French demands in the declaration and related classified documents: "Beginning in early 2017, enhanced Forward Presence will comprise multinational forces provided by framework nations and other contributing Allies on a *voluntary, sustainable, and rotational* basis [emphasis added]".<sup>223</sup>

Following the Warsaw summit, the Alliance began the implementation phase for the eFP. French representatives insisted on maintaining a light NATO chain of command, including placing limits on SACEUR's operational control and mandating NAC agreements before transitioning from peace to crisis activities.<sup>224</sup> The country was also eager to avoid

219 NATO, "NATO Defence Ministers agree to enhance collective defence and deterrence".

220 J. Ingham, "British troops to lead new Nato defence of Baltic States from Russian 'aggression'", *Express*, 15 June 2016; A. Smale, "In a reversal, Germany's military growth is met with Western relief", *The New York Times*, 6 June 2016; NATO, "NATO Secretary General congratulates Germany for contributions to Alliance security", 2 June 2016.

221 D. Robinson, H. Foy, "NATO sets out plan to put troops on eastern flank", *The Financial Times*, 14 June 2016.

222 Press conference by President François Hollande on NATO, Warsaw, 9 July 2016, *Vie Publique*.

223 NATO, Warsaw Summit Communiqué, 9 July 2016, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_133169.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_133169.htm)

224 Interview with a French diplomat (Brussels, 2019).

escalating tensions with Russia and warned against exercises with all four battlegroups on Russia's border.<sup>225</sup> When SACEUR wrote a strategic directive for the eFP in cooperation with the eFP participating nations, France thus took steps to maintain political control over eFP activities and to circumscribe SACEUR's freedom of action.<sup>226</sup> SACEUR eventually obtained operational control for situational awareness, strategic communication, and posture management only.<sup>227</sup>

On November 19, 2016, French Defence Minister Jean-Yves le Drian provided additional details regarding the first French deployment in Estonia during a bilateral meeting with his Estonian counterpart at the Halifax forum, wherein he "confirmed that as part of the forward deployment of NATO forces, France will send five Leclerc tanks, 13 infantry combat vehicles and 300 French soldiers to Estonia next year".<sup>228</sup>

### *From prudence to involvement in the East*

From January 2017 to January 2022, France's communication on its *Lynx* mission – the name given to the French deployment in the eFP – remained relatively prudent and discreet. The focus remained national and coalitional operations in the South. Thus, French officials sought to strike a balance between the Allies and Russia, demonstrating France's contribution to Alliance security on the one hand while assuring Moscow that there was no threat linked to the eFP deployment. French strategic communication consisted of key messages repeated by French policymakers from the military and political levels. These messages included: France's solidarity and determination to deploy troops in Estonia and Lithuania despite operational pressures; its commitment to enhance interoperability with both host and framework nations; the purely defensive posture of the deployment within the boundaries of the NATO-Russia Founding Act; and the implementation of a credible deterrent.<sup>229</sup> In this, the French narrative was similar to the cautious strategic communication strategies of Germany, Spain, and Belgium on the eFP.

In this context, French discourse and practice regarding the eFP have taken a drastic turn. During his greetings to the Armed Forces on January 19, 2022, Emmanuel Macron

225 Interview with a French diplomat (phone call, 2021).

226 Interview with a French general officer (phone call, 2021).

227 H. Brauss, N. Carstens, "Germany as framework nation", in A. Ianoszka, C. Leuprecht, A. Moens (eds.), "Lessons from the enhanced Forward Presence, 2017-2020", *NDC Research Paper* No.14, NATO Defense College, Rome, November 2020.

228 "La France enverra en Estonie des chars et des véhicules de combat d'infanterie", French Embassy in Tallinn, 19 November 2016, available at <https://ee.ambafrance.org>

229 "Dossier de presse enhanced Forward Presence", Ministère des Armées, June 2017.

quickly passed over the situation in the Sahel to insist on the contribution of French forces to the security of Europe:

We continued to deploy for the security of our European partners within the framework of NATO and eFP missions with our Baltic friends. And we will continue to do so in the long run.<sup>230</sup>

Macron also declared France's willingness to engage in new NATO activities, citing its potential role as a framework nation for an eFP-like battlegroup in Romania. Defence Minister Florence Parly then announced the dispatch of an expert mission to the country to study the parameters of such a deployment.<sup>231</sup> Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, France denounced the war as a serious violation of international treaties.<sup>232</sup> The country immediately implemented heavy economic sanctions against Russia and expelled Russian diplomats from its soil. In addition, France decided on a series of reassurance measures in coordination with its NATO partners.<sup>233</sup> This included bulking up its contribution to enhanced Air Policing missions and announcing the participation of its Air Force in enhanced Vigilance activities in Bulgaria, Romania, and Poland. It also deployed its spearhead battalion in Constanta, Romania within the framework of its new *Aigle* mission.<sup>234</sup> Additionally, France extended its *Lynx* mission in Estonia for 2022, thus breaking with its previous rotational policy. In this context, one can assume that France no longer considers itself bound by the NATO-Russia Founding Act. It is now willing to stay in Estonia for more than a year and endorse a leadership role in an eFP-like deployment in Romania. France is thus showing unprecedented voluntarism towards its Eastern European Allies today. This activism demonstrates France's willingness to maintain its rank within NATO by becoming a driving force of the eFP's adaptation.

Despite recent events in Mali, France also continues to use its involvement in the eFP as a bargaining chip to induce greater contributions from eastern Allies to French and EU operations in Africa.<sup>235</sup> This practice is rooted in the French trans-organisational reading

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230 "Vœux aux armées du Président Emmanuel Macron", Elysée, 19 January 2022.

231 "Déclaration de Mme Florence Parly, ministre des armées, sur le partenariat stratégique franco-roumain et l'OTAN, à Bucarest le 27 janvier 2022", *Vie Publique*, 27 January 2022.

232 Message from President Emmanuel Macron to the armed forces, Elysée, 28 February 2022; Adresse aux Français, Elysée, 2 March 2022.

233 See: "Renforcement de la posture défensive et dissuasive de l'OTAN sur le flanc est de l'Europe", Ministère des Armées, 16 March 2022.

234 France took command of the NATO Response Force's Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) in January 2022.

235 Interview with a former defence advisor at the French delegation to NATO (Brussels, 2019).



of burden-sharing between NATO focused on the East and the EU increasingly involved in the South. In French discourse, Africa is a region where NATO “has no pretension to intervene”; by contrast, the European Union enjoys a unique range of instruments to ensure the security and development of the African countries in which it deploys.<sup>236</sup> This strategic trade-off between France and its eastern Allies creates tangible ripple effects on their perceptions and public discourses since they also depict their participation in EU operations in Africa as a way to share the burden of European security. The Estonian narrative on its military contribution to French and EU operations is quite striking in that connection: “We do not want to be security consumers. We see it as a partnership, and we work with our Allies if necessary”.<sup>237</sup> The ideal impact of such a contribution is significant as it creates a sense of friendship and reciprocity between France and its Eastern European Allies.

## Conclusion

At the beginning of the negotiation process for the eFP, France expressed concerns about the demands of Poland and the Baltic States to position troops on their territories. Despite their misgivings, French officials eventually engaged in negotiations on the eFP and even shaped its doctrinal foundations by committing the Alliance to the “tripwire” concept. France’s active contributions to early talks enabled the country to emerge as a privileged interlocutor whose views carried weight. This participation could also be interpreted as a way to convince Allies of France’s status as a great power willing and able to contribute significantly to collective Alliance security despite its own national constraints. At the military level, if France’s negotiation strategy was initially marked by rigidity, it later relied more on pedagogical tactics, including briefings to better explain to Allies and NATO its stance on command and control. France also compromised on the inclusion of Poland in eFP after the United States pressured it to do so.

In spite of this, France was the only Quad member and nuclear Ally to refuse framework nation status. Instead, it sought to limit SACEUR’s powers as much as possible. Nevertheless, France promised to participate as a contributing nation with significant capabilities. Choosing the UK, Germany, Estonia, and Lithuania as framework and host

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236 Interviews with French military officers (Brussels) and a diplomatic advisor at the French delegation to NATO (2019).

237 C. de Camaret, “Kersti Kaljulaid, présidente de l’Estonie: ‘Il faut parler avec la Russie, mais sans naïveté’”, France 24, 18 November 2019.

nations could then be understood as a coupling strategy intended to reinforce military cooperation and bilateral links with its main European partners.

France therefore constantly oscillated between proactivity and reactivity throughout the decision-making process. Historical Gaullian practices aimed at circumscribing a forward presence as well as the powers of the NATO military authorities thus coexisted with more “positive” practices intended to gather support for French demands. In this, French negotiation strategies generated less friction than during the NCS adaptation.

Following its launch in January 2017, France used the eFP as a communication and bargaining tool to promote solidarity with eastern Allies and encourage them to participate in French and EU operations in Africa. The country also took good care to restate the principles of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, both to deescalate tensions with Russia and to counter its narrative about NATO. However, Russia’s repeated violations of international law have caused a radical change in the French posture over the past few months. From an Ally reluctant to deploy ground troops eastwards in 2016, France has emerged as one of the most proactive countries in the Alliance, in particular by proposing the extension of the eFP to Romania. This evolution in French discourse and practice must be monitored if we are to judge whether it is only temporary or something more long-term.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide an in-depth analysis of France's negotiating behaviour within NATO. From a historical standpoint, it has first demonstrated that France's NATO policy stems from an enduring Gaullian perspective. Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to re-enter France into the NATO Command Structure did not violate the Gaullian orthodoxy in NATO affairs. French stakeholders in Paris and Brussels still defend Gaullian principles in the organization to this day. They consistently seek to preserve national autonomy by exerting strong political control over NATO decisions, carefully monitoring its human, material, and financial resources while delimiting its missions and geographical scope. Moreover, while refusing systematic alignment on the US posture, France does not hesitate to reaffirm its solidarity with Allies. As such, the Gaullian orthodoxy constitutes a core belief for French stakeholders, one marked by consistency and stability over time.

It does not mean, however, that France's reintegration in 2009 did not affect its influence strategies within NATO. Over the past decade, French stakeholders have grown increasingly aware of the harmful effects of an overly reactive posture. They now seek to develop a "positive agenda" to erase or at least attenuate the image of a difficult Ally that pursues its narrow self-interests. Today, the country is especially proactive regarding nuclear deterrence, cyber- and space-defence due to its technological advantage in these areas. Yet, the positive effects of such an endeavour are regularly trumped by France's still predominantly rigid negotiating behaviour.

This paradoxical situation is visible – and striking – in the two decision-making processes that this paper examined: the NATO Command Structure adaptation and the launch of the enhanced Forward Presence in 2016. France did not position itself as an agenda-setter in either of these two decision-making processes. Witnessing the growing concerns of its eastern Allies, it failed to seize the initiative early enough to offer ideas congruent with its vision of European defence. Indeed, one can observe for both cases that France was initially cautious about its Allies' requests to bolster the Alliance. If France sought to show some goodwill by contributing to collective thinking, its overall negotiating posture can nevertheless be described as reactive. The country regularly confronted the international bureaucracy and its Allies during both negotiation processes, so much so that it found itself isolated on several occasions. As a result, France was left to extract concessions by standing firm on issues it wished to correct or inject into negotiated documents – even blocking decisions in some instances. This negotiating behaviour undeniably harms

France's influence within NATO by overshadowing an otherwise significant contribution to the security of the Alliance.

It is thus possible to conclude that France's "positive agenda" is still in its infancy and struggles to gain the upper hand over reactive influence strategies. On the one hand, the image of France as the Alliance's *enfant terrible* has the merit of positioning the country as a major stakeholder whose views cannot be ignored. Indeed, France seldom remains neutral or takes a backseat during negotiations. Rather, the trend observed in the two case studies is one of sustained involvement in collective decision-making in both formal and informal NATO venues.

On the other hand, France regularly deprives itself of opportunities to shape NATO debates in a positive way and to improve its image with its Allies accordingly. By reluctantly witnessing the rise of new issues within NATO and failing to anticipate them early enough, the country complicates its task and often antagonizes its Allies during negotiations. The problem does not lie in France's Gaullian mindset *per se*, but in the way this mindset has historically translated into reactive practices because of its lack of visibility on NATO's decision-making process until 2009. As scholar Stanley Hoffmann put it, de Gaulle always "combined intransigence on certain principles with pragmatism in execution"<sup>238</sup>, thus proving that there is not a single way to apply Gaullian principles. Looking ahead, it will be necessary to pay attention to France's negotiating behaviour within NATO to determine whether it can strike a balance between "positive" and "reactive" practices and whether it can therefore position itself as an agenda-setter.

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238 S. Hoffmann, "Gaullism by any other name", *Foreign Policy*, No.57, 1984.





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