

# France's "Return" to NATO: An Inopportune Decision

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IN **POLITIQUE ÉTRANGÈRE** 2009/5 **Special Issue**, PAGES 151 TO 156

PUBLISHER **INSTITUT FRANÇAIS DES RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES**

ISSN 0032-342X

ISBN 9782865926176

DOI 10.3917/pe.hs3.0151

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-politique-etrangere-2009-5-page-151?lang=en>



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I.F.R.I. | *Politique étrangère*

2009/5 - Hors série

pages 151 à 156

ISSN 0032-342X

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Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse:

<http://www.cairn.info/revue-politique-etrangere-2009-5-page-151.htm>

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Pour citer cet article :

"France's 'Return' to NATO: An Inopportune Decision", *Politique étrangère*, 2009/5 Hors série, p. 151-156.

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## France's 'Return' to NATO: An Inopportune Decision

**Jean-Pierre Chevènement**

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Translated by: Clémence Sebag

The French decision to re-enter NATO's integrated military structure is merely the confirmation of a series of shifts that started a long time ago. But it is no less questionable a decision. It is a symbolic decision that affects France's image internationally. It by no means guarantees that the Alliance will evolve in a way that corresponds to France's national interests; nor does it shed light on France's ambiguous future. It does, however, in a very real way, risk diminishing France's will to defend itself.

politique étrangère

The decision of French President Sarkozy that France re-enter NATO's integrated military structure is, as his supporters have pointed out, the confirmation of a series of earlier shifts. The validity of these changes was debatable at the time but they are now a fixture of the French political landscape.

Indeed, France played a part in NATO's survival after the Cold War by agreeing to an intervention in 1994-1995 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, and, later, in 1999 – this time without a UN mandate – in Kosovo and more generally in Yugoslavia. As early as December 1995, France re-entered NATO's Military Committee. France had agreed to intervene outside its original sphere of influence.

At the beginning, the Atlantic Alliance, of which France never ceased to be a part, was a defensive alliance, restricted to the Euro-Atlantic zone. Over the years, and particularly since 1999 (Kosovo) and 2001 (Afghanistan), it has become a global alliance committed to stabilization and peace-enforcement operations. This is effectively a shift in the organization's stated purpose. NATO is now portrayed as 'the UN's military arm,' yet

this has not always been the case. During the Kosovo conflict, NATO bombed Yugoslavian cities, supplanting the UN whose Security Council had not issued a mandate for intervention. We can only hope that this regrettable situation will not be repeated. It is worth noting, however, that the manner in which the Kosovo conflict was dealt with set a precedent that led to the invasion of Iraq by a 'coalition of volunteers' led by the United States and, for the most part, recent or older members of NATO. In opposing the invasion of Iraq, France was a minority within the United States-dominated organization, as well as within the European Union.

Furthermore, France has now become one of the main contributors to NATO's 'stabilization operations.' As such, was it necessary to take things further by re-entering NATO's Defense Planning Committee (DPC) as well as its Chief of Staff ranks? In other words, France is once again a part of NATO's integrated military structure, which remains, from an operational point of view, under the supreme command of an American general. Justifying this decision is no small task because it is a political and symbolic decision whose importance should by no means be played down.

### **What are France and NATO's common interests?**

The expected benefits do not, in my view, outweigh the disadvantages that this decision involves. The French President's justification ("We are a part of the Western family") can only be the result of a hasty assessment. The decline of the American superpower is indeed on the cards. The United States is living beyond its means. The nation's abysmal deficit is directly contributing to the weakening of the dollar as a worldwide currency. China has emerged as global competitor. Its economic power will match that of the US within the next fifteen years and it already holds the dollar's fate in its hands. Moreover, the American army is simultaneously involved in two conflicts whose outcome is uncertain – in Iraq and in Afghanistan. Clearly, it is not the right time to further complicate President Obama's task. However, should this mean that France be prepared, for the sake of the 'Western spirit,' to contribute to the US military effort, in Afghanistan for instance, as it has already done, between 2001 and 2008? How far is France prepared to commit itself and will any prospective token of commitment coincide with France's own national interest?

France would be well advised not to be dragged into a "Clash of Civilizations,"<sup>1</sup> as Samuel P. Huntington termed it. There is not a single South, nor

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1. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

is there one North – thankfully. Terrorism and asymmetrical wars are factors, but probably non-determining ones, of the world to come. What will be decisive in the long run is the upheaval in the hierarchy of power. Terrorism is a multidimensional phenomenon on which greater and lesser powers are forced to compromise in order to maintain appearances (the Russians have the Chechens; the Chinese have the Uighurs). There is little evidence to support the idea that terrorists around the world all obey the same logic. Preventing terrorist activity is, first and foremost, the role of police forces.

While Franco-American friendship has deep-seated historical roots, the two countries' policies have not always been in line. The United States, in both world wars, only intervened alongside France in 1917 and December 1941 respectively – although their intervention was a decisive factor in both victories. However, historians – if no-one else – are aware that in 1919 the US did not honor the commitment made by Thomas Woodrow Wilson to Georges Clemenceau. Yet without US support, Europe was headed for another world war. What is more, it must not be forgotten that without General de Gaulle, whose government was not recognized by Roosevelt until July 1944, France would have been treated as a defeated and occupied nation.

### **The policies of Washington and Paris have not always been in line**

Thankfully, President Sarkozy's decision that France return to NATO's integrated military structure coincided with President Obama's election in Washington. President Obama has started a complete and most welcome reassessment of American policy in the Near and Middle East. France cannot be sure, however, that its opinion will have any influence on what are, ultimately, decisions taken by the Americans.

### **Current challenges facing the Alliance**

It is clear that the basis of France's decision to re-enter NATO's military command predates Barack Obama's election. The ideas behind the decision were already developed in the French *White Paper on Defense and National Security* published in June 2008.<sup>2</sup> This paper cites "the shift in common strategic interests towards sensitive crisis areas such as the Middle East or Asia." Yet these common interests are not self-evident. France and the United States have not always had shared interests in the Persian Gulf (also known as the Arabian Gulf). France and the US are not equally involved in the Caspian zone – a zone of Russian influence, Russia being considered a strategic partner of the Euro-

2. An English translation is available at <http://www.cfr.org/publication/16615/>

pean Union (EU). Finally, Afghanistan, central to Zbigniew Brzezinski's *Heartland*, is not part of France's traditional zone of influence. Moreover, many other unstable countries could serve as 'sanctuaries' for terrorism.

In other words, one gets a sense that France's policy vis-à-vis NATO as well as its new national security policy – which elevates Jihadist terrorism to the rank of chief threat to France – disregard the fact that President Bush is no longer in office. The new power landscape has not been taken into account and, in the name of 'Western solidarity,' France could well be led into conflicts that are not hers. The US is very much invested in Asia. Europe is no longer its main preoccupation. In future, France and Europe may well be forced to rely more on themselves. Re-entering NATO's antiquated and, frankly, out-of-date military structure hardly seems the best way for France to prepare itself to face future challenges.

As for the argument that, since France has soldiers engaged in battle, it should also have generals within NATO's military command, it is a weak one. Indeed, important decisions are political: what is happening around Kabul is not decided in Lisbon, Norfolk or Mons, but in Washington. Arguing that France's complete reintegration into NATO would contribute to 'European defense' is equally weak. Purportedly, France's re-entry into NATO would ease its partners' suspicions about its agenda. This is a rather naïve vision of the situation. France's allies rely on NATO for their defense because it is cheaper and because many of them prefer to depend on Washington than on Brussels – which is perfectly understandable – or even Paris, London or Berlin. Their wariness is historical.

The great danger in France's complete reintegration into NATO is the way in which roles will be shared out. Indeed, the Americans are happy to share the burden but not the responsibilities. When it comes to NATO's limits, we do not know what they will be tomorrow. While Ukraine and Georgia's entry date has been deferred, their entry has not been ruled out. American policy will lead France further and further east – in contradiction with France's fundamental interests, which are to maintain good relations with Russia. President Obama currently agrees with this policy but what will tomorrow bring? Europeans risk becoming ever more dependent on Washington to guarantee their security. Even France – despite de Gaulle's effort to give it the will and the means to defend itself without breaking its alliance with the US – is at risk, with the current financial and budgetary crisis, of giving in and gradually lessening its defense effort, which is already historically weak.<sup>3</sup>

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3. The French defense budget is 1.6 per cent of GDP, once the Gendarmerie budget has been subtracted.

One can only be concerned about the fate of France's 'spirit of defense.' It was already dealt a severe blow when military service was abolished in 1996. Getting involved in external conflicts, as a part of NATO, risks weakening it further.

In what way will the decision for France to completely re-enter NATO's military structure better equip it to face future security challenges? This is difficult to measure. It is easy to measure the financial and human cost of this decision. It is easy to measure – with some sadness, one might add – the extent to which it will crush the idea that France, among Western nations, is a nation with a difference. Symbolically, this decision will have a strong impact, particularly vis-à-vis Southern or 'emerging nations' – that are set to be the great powers of tomorrow. France is pre-emptively abdicating the idea that it, and through it, Europe could also be one of a number of powers influencing the world of tomorrow.

**In what way can re-entering NATO's military structure be the answer to future security challenges?**

Symbolic perhaps but, when it comes to international politics, symbolism is everything. The image that other nations have of France as a great international country is likely to suffer from this decision. France's self-image, too, will suffer from the boomerang effect. The official line is an attempt to reassure the French nation: France is neither renouncing its independence nor its nuclear deterrent. Nor is France renouncing the principle whereby it will not take action automatically but on a case-by-case basis – and this even within NATO. Yet is it possible to repeatedly say 'no' within an organization dominated by the United States and within which France aspires to play not merely a star pupil role but rather a starring role?

Several of France's European partners are already calling – in hushed voices – for a Europe 'free of nuclear weapons' or for France's return to NATO's Nuclear Planning Group. Clearly, this could only mean one thing – and not in the distant future either: the sublimation of France's nuclear deterrent within the realm of negotiations on nuclear disarmament. We must not forget a simple fact: the French nuclear deterrent is *tous azimuts*; that is to say, it can be used against any nation posing a real threat to France. However, it obviously also contributes to the Alliance's global dissuasion. Any talk of a potential 'broader dissuasion' – which France's European neighbors have not requested – would be inopportune at this time.

## Is this decision putting France in danger?

A choice that modifies France's independent defense stance cannot be wise. The decision to re-enter NATO's military command completely contradicts the spirit of General de Gaulle's decisions in 1966, even though the geopolitical climate is different. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. New powers are rising. Barack Obama will not be the president of the United States for ever. His mission might be, for all we know, to restore US leadership in the world. France is a friend of the United States, but its foremost preoccupation must remain the protection of its national interest. This can only be guaranteed by an independent defense – which does not preclude alliances. Europe, although seemingly Atlantist, is in fact pacifist. Europe wishes to go on retreat. But in military language the term 'retreat' has a specific meaning. Can the US really rely on such 'allies'?

Through lack of willpower, France could be led to abandon its own interests. As it is, it is stuck between the devaluation of the dollar and competition from countries with low labor wages. In other words, France is in danger of taking a step back from History – including through taking part in conflicts in which its fundamental interests are not at stake. France needs merely to abdicate the last thread of its sovereignty – a truly 'national' defense – and then it will truly be 'defenseless.'

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A body deprived of its immune system has lost its 'defenses.' In renouncing its sovereignty, particularly in military terms, France faces this risk. What is NATO? What will its future 'strategic concept' be? What are the limits of France's commitment? These questions should have been addressed before making a decision. Instead, France is simply giving its support. France will not be made to agree to anything against its will. But where does its will reside? It appears that France's European partners are not preoccupied with building a European defense and France cannot do it without them. What then can truly be achieved?

As for the United States, it seems to show little interest in a France that has repented of its own accord. That same France will have to show a lot of courage and tenacity to erase – if that is even possible – in the minds of other nations as well as its own the consequences of a truly inopportune decision.

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### KEY WORDS

Atlantic Alliance, re-entering NATO, United States, French defense policy