

# The evolution of NATO, and France's position

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**The main themes of the France-NATO relationship are still Europe/Atlantic and independence/solidarity. But the context has changed. What are the consequences for France ? NATO together with whom, and to do what ? Would rejoining the integrated military structure serve the interests of the European defence project or do the opposite ? The general question of Franco-American relations is not the specific issue of NATO. Above all we have to maintain our independence, the basis of our foreign policy for the past half-century.**

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THE PROBLEM of France's position within NATO is not a new one. It goes back not merely to the 1960s, but to the late 1940s, and it has revolved endlessly around two principal themes : Europe/Atlantic, and independence/solidarity, against a background of Franco-American relations, always difficult, or at any rate never simple.

## **Europe/Atlantic**

In 1948, at the time of the Brussels Pact, which paved the way for NATO in the following year, there were already, in France, two tendencies : that of President Auriol, of Paul Ramadier, of Robert Schuman and of General de Lattre, who wanted to give priority to Europe, its own interests, its own defence ; and that of Georges Bidault and Marshal Juin, who favoured an Atlantic strategy, with a peripheral status for Europe.

The period of the Fourth Republic was marked by problems, often acute, between France, the United States and NATO.

Matters did not improve with the Fifth Republic, particularly after the nuclear affair, the challenge by Kennedy and the abandonment of the 'nuclear sharing' project, France's acquisition of the bomb and its refusal to join the American nuclear system, which the British had accepted.

Thus there emerged two viewpoints as to what constituted what was called 'the Western bloc' :

- . one, American, of a Europe on board with the United States, in a grand Atlantic community ;
- . the other, European, of a Europe with its own defence resources, maintaining a relationship with the United States based on equal partnership.

Konrad Adenauer and General de Gaulle, in the early 1960s, shared the belief that there was no certainty that the United States would always remain committed to Europe's defence. Nearly 20 years later, in 1979, Henry Kissinger said : 'European allies should not keep asking us to multiply assurances that we cannot possibly mean . . .'

Nevertheless, most European countries have believed, up to the present day, that their defence is the one provided for them by the United States, and many of them drew the conclusion that therefore no particular effort was required of them. The East European countries have reinforced this majority, since, even if they have joined Europe for the sake of prosperity, they

still count on the United States—and hence on the Atlantic Alliance—for their security.

There have of course been some achievements in the realm of European defence, but they are still limited.

## **Independence/solidarity**

For General de Gaulle, and for those who followed him, sovereignty over our fundamental decisions was an absolute imperative. Independence does not mean isolation. Independence should be consolidated by an alliance, on condition that it is a genuine alliance between equal partners, and not mere membership of a bloc, with the dependence that that implies. With the refusal of the three-country directorate (United States, United Kingdom and France) that de Gaulle wanted, it seemed clear to him that the United States would simply do as it pleased, followed, as always, by the British. But, and this is the fundamental issue, France should never be tied to an integrated system if it can thereby be automatically committed to decisions other than those that correspond to its own vital interests and to its perception of world affairs. It must always retain sovereignty over its fundamental decisions, and this concerns, in the first place, the military domain.

But this determination to retain independence has never been to the exclusion of solidarity. From the moment that we withdrew from the integrated military structure, the Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreements defined the parameters of our military contribution. In recent years we have been present in a growing number of NATO military bodies, and participated in more and more military operations. But that should not jeopardise the non-automatic character of our commitments, a rule which was constantly reaffirmed.

In the autumn of 1982, the Americans wanted to reinforce and to structure economic cooperation between members in the NATO framework. Finding that things were moving too slowly, and irritated by the hesitations, notably of France, President Ronald Reagan, in a speech, gave the impression that everything was signed, sealed and delivered. Very irritated, President Mitterrand, then himself redrafted a communiqué clarifying things, commenting in a verbal aside : 'If General de Gaulle refused military integration it wasn't just so that I could accept economic integration.'

## **Prospects**

After this retrospective, there are today a number of questions that need asking. Four of these are particularly worth mentioning.

### **France's position today**

To justify a revision of our position, it is sometimes said that the situation today is not the same as in the 1960s for example, when the American presence in Europe was very strong. Sovereignty over our fundamental decisions is not a matter of circumstances. Independence is not a debating point, it either exists or it does not. It is true that the current situation is neither that of 1966, nor of the years that followed. We had a potential adversary, and a political objective that was common to France and to the other members of NATO. NATO operations today are chiefly out-of-area, multiple and diverse. Moreover, we do not know which of the new

candidate countries will tomorrow become members of NATO, nor what the possible consequences for the organization might be. We do not know precisely what NATO's role, purpose and composition should be. Before knowing the answers, can we really define our position in relation to the NATO military organization ?

### **A return ?**

We are participating more and more in operations. We are, with the British and after the Americans, the second or third military power contributing to NATO operations. Is it not abnormal, it is asked, that we do not have a place at the highest-level decision-making military bodies ? For our soldiers, moreover, it is not very gratifying to find themselves rated lower than other countries whose contribution is smaller.

Valid as this argument may be, it cannot be determinant. The problem of our position in relation to the integrated military structure has both a military and a political aspect. On the military side, it would be wrong to think that the problem was simply black and white, that there are not several possible options, that we must rejoin completely or not at all ; the matter is more complex, and one should not allow oneself to be trapped in such an approach. We will have to make our views known within NATO's political bodies in which we participate fully on the direction in which the organization is heading, and that should be a precondition to any decision we take regarding the military organization. What appears certain in any event is that we cannot adopt a position that could call into question the principle of the non-automatic character of our commitments. This does not mean that we too do not have to examine how, in the new context, we can make our participation in NATO's military activities more effective, and as a result negotiate.

### **A European defence entity**

It is sometimes said that if France were to rejoin completely the NATO military organization, we could create a European defence entity, because some of our European friends consider that we stay outside because of anti-Americanism, and it is that which hinders them from giving full support to that aspect of Europe.

That is hardly convincing. France is the only country to talk of a European defence identity : the others only talk about European defence policy. The real problem is one of general will. Our position in regard to NATO serves as pretext or alibi to those of our European partners who do not want to make a great effort towards defence. The real question is one of ensuring that all European countries feel an involvement, commensurate with their size, with a European defence effort. So long as they do not, there cannot be a true European defence pillar, and the worry must even be that our return to the integrated military structure ends by dissolving the little that does exist of that pillar today.

### **Franco-American relations**

Moreover, it is also said that a strong gesture towards the NATO military organisation would serve to improve our relations with the United States.

There is a specific NATO problem ; it is serious, it is difficult, and it should be treated as such. At the same time there is a general problem of relations between France and the United

States—the France that in 1940 the Americans stopped admiring as before, and the United States in which we no longer find the America that we formerly loved : these two countries that share the same values, and often a deep friendship, but no longer know how to talk to each other, that do not know how to admit that they might have different conceptions and interests.

## Conclusion

**Our special position** regarding NATO's military organisation is viewed throughout the world as a sign of our non-alignment, in other words our independence. That does not mean that, in a new context, nothing must change. Yet nothing should be done that might be seen as calling into question that independence, the foundation of our foreign policy for nearly half a century.

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### P.-S.

Ambassador Francis Gutmann is a former Secretary-General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (France)