

---

## France and NATO or How to Build a European Defence

*Marcel H. Van Herpen\**

**Theme:** France will probably announce its reintegration into the NATO's military command at the coming NATO summit of Strasbourg-Kehl, 3-4 April 2009.

**Summary:** The author analyses the present debate in France on the reintegration of France into NATO's military command. Is it the end of Gaullism and the end of French efforts to build a European defence, as opponents from the left and the right pretend? According to the author, Sarkozy's move is less *gaulliste* than *gaullien*: he acts as the General did, taking daring initiatives when he deems them necessary. Far from giving up this objective, building a European defence is at the centre of his initiative. By bringing France back into NATO, Sarkozy wants to woo Britain, who has always been suspicious of French anti-Atlanticist tendencies. Cooperation with Britain, 'the indispensable nation' for European defence, will become easier when France becomes a fully-fledged member of the Alliance.

**Analysis:** After 43 years' absence in the military organisation of NATO, the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, has decided that it is time to turn this page in history. At the NATO summit, on 3 and 4 April 2009 in the French border town of Strasbourg and the German village of Kehl, France will make its *joyeuse rentrée* into Atlantic military structures. Although Sarkozy had already announced this U-turn shortly after his election, reactions in France have remained rather muted until recently. Strangely enough, most negative reactions did not come from his own –Gaullist– UMP party, but from the centrist Democratic Movement and the Socialist Party. This is surprising for two reasons. First, because the French socialists and centrists, who now express their attachment to France's special position in NATO, were among those who, in 1966, most vehemently criticised De Gaulle's decision. Secondly, the rather muted reaction of Sarkozy's own UMP was strange because this party is the official heir to De Gaulle's legacy. A French President who declares himself a convinced Gaullist but at the same time prepares to join the military command structure of NATO is like the pope of Rome declaring that he no longer believes in Christ. Recently, however, a more serious debate is taking off and, again, it is the socialists who are to the forefront.

### *Socialist and Gaullist Critics of Sarkozy's Decision*

In an article in *Le Monde* (17 February 2009) Ségolène Royal, presidential candidate for the Socialist Party in 2007, opened a frontal attack on Sarkozy's plans. She wrote that 'France sends a signal to return to the fold of the West that goes in the opposite direction of the strategy of opening initiated by Barack Obama' (a strange argument, because

---

\* Director of the Cicero Foundation, an independent pro-EU and pro-Atlantic think-tank.

Obama has explicitly welcomed the French step). She considered it a regrettable decision, because the Atlantic alliance is 'the armed fist of the West'. She would have preferred France to remain a 'bridge' between East and West and North and South, because 'the world needs countries that play the role of mediators'. She also raised questions about France's diplomatic independence, because once France has entered the integrated military command 'a considerable moral pressure' will be exerted upon it. Confronted with this 'stifling pressure for unanimity', France would be tempted to give in to its allies, in the first place to the US. Royal could imagine 'that the reintegration of France into NATO could be understood as a tactical choice that was part of an ambitious project for an independent European defence'. But here she finds only 'a meagre balance sheet'. Even worse: she concludes that it is, in fact, a zero sum game: the process of reintegrating NATO makes use of financial means and personnel that can no longer be used for European tasks: 'One cannot ask European defence to progress and at the same time spend more money for NATO. There is a strong contradiction here that resembles to choosing too easily NATO against Europe'.

Other socialist heavyweights repeated the same or similar arguments, and some of them even went so far as to openly regret the loss of the old Gaullist orthodoxy. One of these is the former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine who, in an interview with the weekly *Marianne* (23 February 2008), said: 'In a great part of the right, and a small part of the left, there is a scent of a return to old-fashioned Atlanticism. There exists almost no Gaullism in the French right and certain people, on the left, want to liberate themselves from a foreign policy à la De Gaulle-Mitterrand-Chirac'. Another socialist, the former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius, said that by reintegrating with NATO, France gave up its special position as a champion of European defence –an argument which does not sound very convincing when used by someone who voted against the European Constitution that was intended to reinforce Europe's Common Foreign and Security Policy–. A fellow socialist, Louis Gautier, a former counsellor of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, wrote in *Le Monde* (21 February 2009) that '... One can fear that the return of France into the integrated organisation will be interpreted in most (European) capitals as a sign that our country gives less priority to European defence (...) France will give the impression that it is leaving the European locomotive which advances too slowly in order to take a seat in one of the coaches of NATO'. General De Gaulle would, indeed, have been surprised if he had known that 43 years after his historical decision, his most fervent defenders would be the socialists.

But recently opponents in Sarkozy's own camp have also joined the debate. A UMP deputy, Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who is President of the Gaullist group *Debout la République* ('Stand Up Republic') accused Sarkozy in *Le Monde* (21 February 2009) of being 'a part of that Right that is ferociously Atlanticist and profoundly alienated from the deep sentiments of the French people to whom Charles De Gaulle had rendered its dignity'. Another UMP deputy, Jacques Myard, who heads the Gaullist circle 'Nation and Republic', declared on his website that he 'firmly opposed the complete reintegration of France in the military structure of the Atlantic alliance, which militarily brings nothing, postpones European defence *ad calendas graecas* and jeopardises the credibility of the diplomatic independence of France'.

#### *Sarkozy: A Pseudo-Gaullist?*

This brings us to the question: is Sarkozy indeed a pseudo-Gaullist, a wolf in sheep's clothing, who has usurped the Gaullist party from the outside in order to implement *anti-Gaullist* policies? The fact that he said not a word about his plans in the presidential

---

election campaign of 2007 might suggest that his opponents have a point. The problem, however, is that Gaullism cannot be reduced to the 1966 decision of De Gaulle to leave the integrated military organisation of NATO. In fact Gaullism is built on three pillars:

- The first pillar is the Constitution of the Fifth Republic that installed a centralist presidential system in France that gave the French President more powers than the President of the US.
- The second pillar is the independent *force de dissuasion*, the French nuclear deterrent.
- The third pillar is to conduct an independent foreign policy and to be recognised as a great power by the other powers.

If we look at the first pillar of De Gaulle's heritage, it is clear that Sarkozy does not question the Constitution of the Fifth Republic. On the contrary, France's 'hyper President' is not only fully using the presidential powers conveyed to him by the Constitution, but he is even stretching them as far as possible, eventually beyond limits that were respected by his predecessors. The fact that the revolt inside his own UMP has remained so meek is a proof of his iron grip on the party.

As concerns the second pillar of Gaullist rule, the *force de dissuasion*, Sarkozy is a convinced defender of the French deterrent. In the defence White Book, published in the spring of 2008, the modernisation of the deterrent is given a prominent place. In 2009, for instance, the strategic air force will obtain new air-launched missiles, the ASMPA, for the Rafale and Mirage 2000-NK3. And for 2010, the M51, a new sea-launched intercontinental ballistic missile, will be deployed, receiving new nuclear warheads in 2015. One cannot, therefore, accuse Sarkozy of neglecting the second pillar of the Gaullist legacy.

What remains is De Gaulle's third objective: to forge an independent foreign policy and to be recognised as a great power. To conduct an independent foreign policy implied for De Gaulle an active *European* policy. Europe was considered by him an important vector of French global influence. But Europe could only be utilised by France as a means to amplify its voice in the world when the three following conditions were fulfilled. First, France should play a leading role in setting a European foreign and defence policy. Secondly, Europe should remain intergovernmental and not develop into a federal state (because this would dilute French influence). Thirdly, the 'Anglo-Saxons' should be kept out of the European project, because they were a threat to French leadership. This meant that the UK should remain outside the European Community and that the overwhelming influence of the US should gradually be neutralised by organising a separate European defence organisation outside and independent from NATO.

#### *European Defence: Giving up the Anti-'Anglo-Saxon' Stance*

If we look at the third pillar of Gaullist orthodoxy, we can observe that little has changed under Sarkozy as regards the utilisation of Europe for French foreign policy goals, as was clear during the French EU Presidency in the first half of 2008. Sarkozy is and also remains a staunch defender of European defence cooperation. He equally shares De Gaulle's preference for an intergovernmental and non-federalist Europe. The big change concerns De Gaulle's preoccupation with keeping the 'Anglo-Saxons' out: to keep Britain out of the European Community and to sidestep the US-dominated NATO by organising an autonomous European defence organisation. But it was not Sarkozy who started this revolution. Paradoxically, it had been two *Gaullist* Presidents who initiated these changes.

---

It was President Georges Pompidou who lifted the French veto and let the UK enter the European Community in 1973. And it was the then President Jacques Chirac, who, in 1995, was the first to break a taboo, when he wanted to reintegrate France into NATO's military structure. However, Chirac's pro-Atlantic U-turn met a premature end after the US rebuffed the French demand to head NATO's South Command.

Three years later Chirac took another initiative that went against Gaullist orthodoxy, when on 3 and 4 December 1998 he met with the British Prime Minister Tony Blair in the French port Saint-Malo. Both leaders issued a 'Joint Declaration on European Defence' in which they said that the EU 'must have capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces'. Chirac's 'Anglo-Saxon' honeymoon, however, turned sour before and during the Iraq War, when relations between France and the US and the UK became extremely strained. Thereupon Chirac fell back on a classical Gaullist position. On April 30 2003 –just after the formal end of the US-British invasion in Iraq– together with the leaders of Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, Chirac took the initiative to set up a 'European Security and Defence Union' with its own headquarters in Tervuren, a Brussels suburb. The initiative was a non-starter and the Americans would later ironically refer to the Brussels initiative as the 'chocolate summit'.

#### *Sarko the Brit*

The French gave Sarkozy the nickname *Sarko l'Américain*. But it would be better to call him 'Sarko the Brit'. Sarkozy's rapprochement with NATO has other reasons than just those to please the Americans. The French President has learnt the lessons of Chirac's two failed efforts of the 1990s. He knows that France's splendid isolation does not work. And he knows that there is one country in Europe that is 'the indispensable nation' when France wants to build a credible European defence: Britain. All attempts to bind Britain closer in a European defence project, however, have failed until now because of Britain's deep distrust of a partner that is suspected of wanting to undermine the Atlantic Alliance. Sarkozy's return to the NATO fold is, in fact, a powerful charm offensive to woo London. Britain will no longer have to distrust a country that is a full fledged member of NATO. This means that closer defence cooperation between the two countries is no longer jeopardised by France's 'special position'. The former French Defence Minister, Michèle Alliot-Marie, alluded to this motive (without, however, mentioning Britain) in an article in *Le Figaro* (17 February 2009), when she wrote: 'The unwillingness of certain European countries to make the necessary efforts to reinforce European defence will be easier to overcome when they will be assured that this will not be built against NATO'.

There are three additional promising aspects of the French rapprochement. First, full NATO membership will enhance the interoperability of the French army with the armies of the US and the European NATO members. Secondly, joint training with the US –the country that has the world's most advanced military forces– will boost the modernisation of the French army. Thirdly, full NATO membership may, eventually, give the French armaments industries access to the huge US defence procurement market, which is fed by a defence budget that amounts to almost *one half* of global defence expenditures. During the Munich Security Conference on 6 and 7 February 2009, Louis Gallois, the CEO of the aeronautic group EADS, told *Le Figaro* (9 February 2009) that he indeed expected an economic spin-off from the French NATO decision: 'We will have to adapt ourselves to this new context. France hasn't participated for forty years in NATO procurement programs or participates only in a very marginal way'.

Many French socialists and Gaullists doubt that Sarkozy is a real Gaullist. He is certainly not a Gaullist in the sense of a high priest who jealously guards the Holy Scripture of the Founding Father of the movement. It is, ironically, the non-Gaullists of the MoDem and the Socialist Party who take this position. Sarkozy, in fact, has gone further down a road that has already been explored –but clumsily and not consequently– by his predecessor, Jacques Chirac. Sarkozy has moved without hesitation and against all opposition from his own party and the opposition. In behaving like this he has showed himself to be less a *gaulliste* than a *gaullien*: he has acted as the General did, self righteous, authoritarian, and taking bold decisions when he deemed this necessary.

## Conclusion

### *France, the US and Britain: A Delicate Balance*

The French return to NATO is not only good news for the US. It could bring a rapprochement between France and Britain, lead to a further Europeanisation of NATO and a strengthening of European defence initiatives. This possibility has been depicted as a danger by some American analysts. In a publication of the conservative Heritage Foundation (WebMemo nr 2315 of 27 February 2009) Ted R. Bromund wrote that the US and the UK 'should reconsider the support they have shown for the gradual Europeanization of the defense of the West. Since 1998, successive Labour governments have committed themselves gradually but steadily to increased defense cooperation within Europe through the EU's European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). This is a serious error. All European-based defense plans are intended to achieve political objectives unrelated to defense. The ESDP's goal is to create a defense organization that does not include the US and to slowly supplant NATO. (...) Both Obama and Brown should return to the tradition that NATO is the sole military component in Europe's security architecture'. The author pleads for a firm recommitment to the US-UK Special Relationship, because 'without British support, the US not only would lose the ally that since 1941 has been its most enduring, stable, and valuable friend, but would also see its position in NATO gravely weakened'. Sarkozy's reintegration into the military command of NATO may lead, therefore, to a delicate triangular balance between France, the US and Britain, in which Britain has to decide how it thinks that its long-term security interests are best served. But with Euro-sceptic British Conservatives waiting in the wings to return to power, it is not yet certain that Sarkozy's charm offensive to woo Britain will be crowned by success.

*Marcel H. Van Herpen*

*Director of the Cicero Foundation, an independent pro-EU and pro-Atlantic think-tank*