

# Raymond Aron and the Transatlantic Crisis, 1945-1966\*

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## Resumo

Para analisar a percepção de Aron acerca das crises transatlânticas entre 1945 e 1966, o foco deve ser posto sobre três “*pommes de discorde*” principais durante este período – a questão do rearmamento alemão (1945-1954), a crise do Suez (1956), o Grande Debate Nuclear (1959-1964). Aron foi desde o início favorável ao rearmamento da Alemanha, apesar da longa relutância oficial francesa, principalmente porque o considerou inevitável para a defesa militar da Europa, e porque tratar a Alemanha como um verdadeiro aliado era a melhor maneira de evitar que a Alemanha ficasse mais perto da URSS para obter a reunificação. Isso porque finalmente, após longa hesitação, apoiou a CED, opondo-se assim a de Gaulle. O Suez alargou realmente a abertura entre Aron e de Gaulle, e no caso de Aron esta discrepância é enraizada na análise muito profunda não somente do papel da França no jogo transatlântico, mas também da natureza das armas nucleares. Aron extraiu da crise do Suez diversas lições: 1 – “a aliança não escrita entre os dois super-poderes contra a Guerra Total” era mais importante, sob o ponto de vista e prática dos EU, do que a solidariedade com aliados europeus. 2 – A estratégia massiva de retaliação deixa o oeste desarmado face “às ameaças secundárias” nas suas fronteiras. 3 – As armas atômicas não seriam suficientes para restaurar o poder anterior de França ou da Grã-Bretanha: um esforço europeu é necessário. Durante o Grande Debate Nuclear, a nova política militar francesa, oficialmente expressa por de Gaulle no seu discurso na *École Militaire* em Novembro 1959, colidiu directamente na renovada estratégia e política militar de Kennedy e McNamara. Aron tentou jogar o papel de um *ombudsman* entre Kennedy e de Gaulle, em vão: se ele achava a doutrina militar Francesa da “*Força de frappe*” anacrônica, e apoiava a estratégia da “resposta flexível” de McNamara que restaurou a relação clauswitziana entre estratégia e política, advogou também a partilha de tecnologia nuclear pelos EU com os seus aliados. De facto, Aron como de Gaulle perseguiu a vontade de restaurar a independência estratégica da Europa, na sua mente, o melhor meio para alcançar um dia um acordo negociado e a reunificação do Velho Continente. Mas este objetivo pareceu-lhe alcançável somente a médio-longo prazo, e antes através da unificação europeia do que por estratégias puramente nacionais.

## Abstract

To analyze Aron's perception of transatlantic crisis between 1945 and 1966, focus must be put on three main transatlantic “*pommes de discorde*” during this period – the issue of German rearmament (1945-1954), the Suez crisis (1956), the Great Nuclear Debate (1959-1964). Aron had from the onstart been favourable to rearming Germany, despite French official long reluctance, mainly because he thought it unescapable for Europe's military defense, and because treating Germany as a true ally was the best way to avoid Germany get closer to the USSR to obtain reunification. That's why he finally, after long hesitation, backed EDC, thus opposing to de Gaulle. Suez actually widened the gap between Aron and de Gaulle, and in Aron's case this discrepancy is rooted in very deep analysis not only of France's role in the transatlantic game, but also of the nature of nuclear weapons. Aron drew from the Suez Crisis several lessons: 1 – “the unwritten alliance of the Two Superpowers against Total War” was more important, in the US view and practise, than solidarity with European allies. 2 – Massive retaliation strategy leaves the West disarmed against “secondary threats” at its borders. 3 – Atomic weapons wouldn't suffice to restore former power of France or Great-Britain: a European effort is necessary. During the Great Nuclear Debate, the new French military policy, officially expressed by de Gaulle in his speech at the *École Militaire* in November 1959, directed collided into Kennedy and McNamara renewed military policy and strategy. Aron tried to play the role of an *ombudsman* between Kennedy and de Gaulle, unsuccessfully: if he found military French doctrine of the “*Force de frappe*” anachronistic, and supported McNamara's “flexible response” strategy which restored the clauswitzian relation between strategy and politics, he also advocated sharing of nuclear technology by the US with its allies. Actually, Aron like de Gaulle pursued the aim to restore Europe's strategic independence, the best mean in his mind to reach one day a negotiated settlement and the reunification of the Old Continent. But this goal seemed to him reachable only in the mid – or long term, and rather through European unification than purely national strategies.

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I chose to reduce as much as possible the number of footnotes: for this whole contribution, please refer to my book, Raymond Aron et le débat stratégique français, Paris, Economica, 2005, 821 p., passim.

In the current climate of misunderstanding between the United States and some European countries regarding world affairs, it is particularly interesting to have a look back at Raymond Aron's positions in similar past circumstances.

Aron's perception is all the more interesting to analyze as he had a good personal knowledge of the four main protagonists of transatlantic crisis, having even shared with three of those countries tragic moments of their history: Germany, where he had observed the rise to power of Nazism in 1930-1933, as he was a teaching assistant in Berlin; the United Kingdom, where he spent four years, with the *France Libre* of general de Gaulle, in 1940-1944, building up his most fundamental concepts in the field of strategy; United States, thanks to his numerous trips as a scholar and his academic friendships (Kissinger, Stanley Hoffmann,...) from 1950 and beyond, and his personal connections with some of Kennedy's closest advisers (Mc George Bundy, Robert Bowie, A. Enthoven) at the beginning of the 60's; and France, of course.

Aron, in his own country, has still the reputation to have been a fierce Atlanticist. A careful historic study, focussing on three main transatlantic "pomes de discorde" between 1945 and 1966 - the issue of German rearmament, the Suez crisis, the Great Nuclear Debate", shows that the reality was much more complex.

### **Rearming Germany: The German Issue from the aftermath of World War II to the Paris Agreements (1954)**

In 1946-1947, the rise of the Soviet threat, materialized by the Iron Curtain (Coup of Prague, Berlin Blockade) and the fact that the Soviet Army was kept on a war footing, brought about actions by the Western powers to organize themselves under the umbrella of a common defense strategy. This rapidly raised the issue of the German rearmament, which antagonized France. With the Marshall Plan (*European Recovery Program*, 1947), an economic response had been initiated to restore Western European wealth, so as to thwart internal communist-led efforts to destabilize democratic governments, especially in France and Italy. The Pact of Brussels (1948), through which France, Great-Britain and the Benelux countries agreed for a mutual defense, was complemented in 1949 by the Washington Treaty and the NATO organization, which commit the United States to the military protection of Europe. The goal however was mostly dissuasive, it was to ensure the USSR of a US intervention - an atomic one - in case of invasion of Western Europe. With the Korean War (June 1950), invasion looked now imminent:

Aron, columnist in *Le Figaro* and having analyzed the mechanisms leading to all-out wars in *Les Guerres en chaîne*<sup>1</sup>, advocated a strong and urgent military buildup, even at the expense of economic rebirth: the participation of Germany to continental defense could not be averted anymore, despite France's reluctance, and is raised by the US supported by the United Kingdom. This will be the main issue of controversy between France and the US, up to the signature of the Paris Agreements in 1954.

Regarding Germany, Aron had always stood in a sharp opposition to French official posture. The French Government, following de Gaulle's legacy after his departure from power in January 1946, obdurately opposed to the restoration of Germany's unity despite US and UK pressure, and demanded three measures seen as security guarantees against an aggressive comeback: economic supervision of the Ruhr region, removal of the Sarre and of the Rhine regions from German political control. For Aron, as early as 1945, this pertained to an outdated view the German Issue, which had *muted* in the context of the aftermath of WWII. As a matter of fact, the issue was not anymore the German threat as such, but the risk that a reunified Germany could join the Soviet camp, thus creating a potentially decisive strategic imbalance in Europe. In this respect, the US military presence in Europe was key to prevent such an evolution.

Actually, the French view gradually converted to this approach, secretly shared by some diplomats already in 1946, accepting the creation of a Western unified German State in June 1948 (London Agreements). But the Rearmament issue, decisively triggered by the Soviet Bomb in 1949 and especially the Korean War in 1950, proved much more touchy and uneasy to accept by France and the French public opinion, remembering of three German invasions of France in 1870, 1914, 1940. However for Aron in October 1950, "nothing less than an allout military effort is now able to save us".

Aron had soon been favourable to German rearmament. Firstly, because to his eyes firmly linking Germany to the Western camp was vital; secondly, because Continental Europe had to bear more largely the burden of its own defense, if it was to avoid what was called at this time the "Peripheral Strategy" by the US and the UK. That meant indirect defense of Europe against a Soviet invasion, mainly through nuclear strategic bombing rather than direct defense on the land. Some high military officials in France shared those views, afraid that Germany could dedicate the whole of its resources to economic build-up while France would exhaust itself bearing alone the

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1 Paris, Gallimard, 1951, 502 p. Soon translated in English under the title: *The Century of Total War*.

burden of continental defense. As a kind of compromise between opposite fears, the project of a European common Defense came out under the shape of the *European Defense Community*, E.D.C. Presented by René Pleven in the end of 1950, inspired by Jean Monnet who had already invented the C.E.C.A.<sup>2</sup> concept, the E.D.C. Plan was a response to American proposal to set up 12 German divisions in the framework of NATO. The E.D.C. negotiation actually lasted four years, triggering a dramatic controversy in France, provoking the US to exert increasingly political pressure so as to obtain ratification of the Treaty by the French Parliament in 1953-1954.

Despite this official “conversion,” Aron remained sceptical for a long time regarding a European Defense, for several reasons. Certainly, he was convinced that a French-German alliance, in the framework of a more united Western Europe, should definitely be the cornerstone of the Continental resistance to the Soviet *hegemon*. But first he doubted that European military unity could be created “from scratch”, ignoring traditional patriotic feelings of European people. Actually, Aron knew well Jean Monnet and some of his closest advisers, like Robert Marjolin, a former fellow student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and a writer in the Free French *La France Libre* review in London that Aron had directed during World War II: Monnet’s team tendency towards abstract and purely legal constructions offended his intimate sense of the long-lasting trends of History, by which he was close to de Gaulle’s own philosophy. Moreover, Aron disliked a French proposal primarily motivated by distrust towards Germany, rather than trust and true spirit of reconciliation.

However, Aron in 1954 ended up by backing EDC, for fear that no other solution could be found to reinforce military strength of Europe, and to avoid a maybe deadly crisis of the Atlantic Alliance in the framework of increased American political pressure. In this critical occasion, he finally opposed to the Gaullist propaganda against the treaty, although he had been a supporter and even a prominent member of de Gaulle’s party, the R.P.F. (*Rassemblement du Peuple Français*) from 1947 to 1953. Politicians like Michel Debré or Jacques Soustelle campaigned on a nationalistic and anti-American mode, they affected to believe in a new “Soviet course” after Staline’s death that in Aron’s eyes was purely tactical<sup>3</sup>. De Gaulle’s own position had indeed evolved: considering that atomic weapons already created some kind of mutual deterrence dramatically reducing the risk of an all-out war, and in the framework of the “dégel”

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2 Communauté Européenne du Charbon et de l’Acier.

3 Cf. his book of 1953, *La Coexistence Pacifique*.

following Staline's death, he advocated for France the recovery of national sovereignty and its "own way" to bring about Détente between East and West. This opposition to Gaullism was actually a prelude to Aron's position during the Great Nuclear Debate.

### The Suez Crisis

Suez actually is the missing link between Aron's position towards Gaullism in 1954, and in 1962-1963. Invisibly, by the conclusions that were respectively drawn from the humiliation of France and Great-Britain, Suez widened the gap between Aron and de Gaulle, and in Aron's case this discrepancy is rooted in very deep analysis not only of France's role in the transatlantic game, but also of the nature of nuclear weapons. But in addition, we also find in Aron's judgment about Suez the roots of its criticism of US military policy at the end of the Fifties and at the beginning of the Sixties.

Aron drew from the Suez Crisis three military lessons<sup>4</sup>. The first one was actually both strategic and diplomatic: what Aron called "the unwritten alliance of the Two Superpowers against Total War" was more important, in the US view and practise, than solidarity with European allies. Second lesson: having put all its eggs in the nuclear basket, due a strategy mostly based on massive retaliation threat by the US Strategic Air Command (SAC), the West was totally disarmed to cope with "secondary threats" at its borders (Corea, Indochina, Suez, etc.): in this respect the United States was predominantly guilty, because of its nuclear secrecy policy which compels close allies like the United Kingdom to reinvent the whole path towards nuclear capability at the expense of conventional forces, just to be able to "exist" besides America.

Third military lesson of the Suez Crisis: faced with a Soviet military strategy which was aggressive and offensive "short of war", Eisenhower's diplomacy, with its moralistic style and its emphasis on a mostly defensive military strategy, was inadapted and dangerous: it fostered Soviet tendency to adventures which might well lead to a "war by misunderstanding". By the way it accelerate the secretly-led French military nuclear program, initiated by de Gaulle in 1945 with the creation of the C.E.A.<sup>5</sup> and then pursued by the Fourth Republic governments. In Aron's view:

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4 The postface of *Espoir et peur du siècle* is very illustrative of Aron's view at this time.

5 Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique.

*“Les Etats nationaux d’Europe doivent s’adapter à une structure des relations internationales radicalement originale par rapport à celle du début du siècle (...). Ils sont [maintenant] intégrés à des coalitions que dirigent des Etats partiellement ou entièrement extra-européens. Dès le temps de paix ils renoncent à leur autonomie militaire. Cet abaissement peut paraître transitoire: l’arme atomique, qui accentue la différence de nature entre Etats nationaux et super-Etats, sera, d’ici dix ou vingt ans, à la disposition de tous. Pour l’essentiel, l’évolution n’en sera pas moins irréversible (...). L’Europe occidentale devra être une, au moins de l’Atlantique à l’Elbe (ou à l’Oder ou à la Vistule) pour être à l’échelle des géants du XXe siècle.”*<sup>6</sup>

Even the possession of the atomic weapon wouldn’t suffice to restore European national states former rank and grandeur, for three reasons: 1 - In 1956 Great-Britain was a nuclear weapon, but that did not enable her to exert sufficient pressure on the United States. 2 - atomic weapons are almost of no use as a mean of an offensive diplomacy, which requires «conventional» forces. 3 - Finally, it is overall weakness of national European states, rather than any specific military feature, that forbids to oppose to Superpowers when they choose to act together. Conclusion: a common European effort is necessary. Aron never considered American military presence in Europe as an ultimate state, much to the contrary: restoring economic and military strength of the Old World had always, in his view, been a prerequisite to a negotiated settlement putting an end to the situation inherited from the aftermath of World War II, which itself was mainly due to American premature demobilization. In this respect a European deterrent would bring a decisive factor in the political-strategic equation. In addition, it would reinforce the US nuclear commitment credibility, that soon-to-come vulnerability of America to Soviet ballistic missiles should deteriorate.

Those views were close to the American vision, except on one critical point. Regarding nuclear matters, the Eisenhower Administration was at this time favourable to “nuclear sharing” with the Europeans (hence the deployment of US-controlled

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6 «Nations et empires», in L’Encyclopédie française, t. XI, Paris, 1957, p. 11. (European national states must adapt to a structure of international relations which is radically new towards what prevailed at the beginning of the 20th Century (...). They are now incorporated inside coalitions led by States, which are partially or totally extra-European. Already in peacetime they must renounce military autonomy. This decay might seem provisional: the atomic weapon, by widening the gap between national States and Super-States, will be, in 10 to 20 years from now, accessible to all. For the main part however the trend will not be reverted (...). Western Europe will have to be united, at least from the Atlantic Ocean to The Elb river (or the Oder or the Vistula river) in order to compare with 20th Century giants).

nuclear weapons in Europe); it was ready too to discuss about a concerted decision mechanism for the use of those weapons, demanded by the French since 1954. *But* it still refused to share technical know-how to manufacture nuclear devices. As many in France, Aron advocated for a militarily stronger Europe able to emancipate from US strategic tutorship.

### **The Great Nuclear Debate**

The Great Nuclear Debate knew its peak in 1963-1964, but originated rather in 1960, when new French military policy, officially expressed by de Gaulle in his speech at the Ecole Militaire in November 1959, directed collided into Kennedy and McNamara renewed military policy and strategy.

The Great Nuclear Debate directly followed what commentators named the “NATO crisis” at the end of the Fifties: France strongly resented US attitude during Suez and its reluctance to associate the French to the strategic direction of the Alliance; in the meantime, US leadership on the Western camp was generally felt as eroding, due to a set of reasons: Europe’s economic rebirth and nascent unification, Soviet dramatic military reinforcement, Eisenhower’s lack of authority in foreign affairs compared with Truman’s...With Kennedy in America and de Gaulle in France began a new course and a symmetric effort to redefine military strategy and decision-mechanisms of the Alliance. On the US side, schematically, the “Dulles doctrine” of “massive retaliation” was given up and replaced by McNamara’s “flexible response” doctrine (Ann Arbor speech, 1962), taking into account the new fact of US strategic vulnerability to Soviet ICBMs, highlighted by the launch of Sputnik in 1957. To better associate Allies (Great-Britain, France and Germany especially) to the use and decision to use strategic atomic weapons, the concept of MLF was promoted, whereas national independent “strike forces”, British as well as French, were discouraged (the Nassau Agreements in 1962 more or less incorporated UK’s nuclear capability inside the US one). Finally, a disarmament agreement with the USSR was forcefully sought for, especially after the Cuba Crisis, up to the Limited Test Ban Treaty of 1963 (August 5, 1963, banning nuclear weapons testing in the atmosphere, in outer space, and under water). To complement this view of Kennedy’s policy, the proposal of a “transatlantic partnership”, creating a large free-trade zone between Europe and America, must be mentioned.

De Gaulle had come back to power in 1958 with the collapse of the Fourth Republic, unable to handle the Algerian War. He revealed his strategic conceptions in November 1959: rupture with the principle of the integration of French forces inside NATO; building of a fully independent national "Force de Frappe" (based upon 50 strategic aircrafts "Mirage IV" operating with A-Bombs and aimed to be operational in 1964), eventually coordinated for its use with US and UK strategic forces; worldwide responsibilities for France and request for a "3 Powers Directorate" of the Alliance (France, Great-Britain, United States). The French Government subsequently quarrelled with the US Government, asking vainly for technical help in nuclear matters, criticizing the Nassau Agreements, refusing the "Transatlantic Partnership" and the admission of Great-Britain inside the European Community (January 1963), as well as to sign the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

With the Great Nuclear Debate Aron delivered his finest performance as an intellectual combining in a unique way the skills of a scholar, a journalist, and a political advisor. Having rejoined the Academic world by becoming Professor at La Sorbonne in 1955, he could devote time and effort to theoretical work on foreign policy and strategic issues in the modern era. This culminated with his masterpiece, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, in 1962, significantly influenced by American academic strategic thinking as regards nuclear matters. At the same time he became one of the most prominent French and even transatlantic columnists in *Le Figaro* and fuelled the debate with polemic essays, especially *Le Grand Débat* in 1963. Last but not least, due to his numerous academic contacts and friendships in the entourage of Kennedy: McGeorge Bundy, Dean of Harvard and National Security Advisor, Alain Enthoven, Robert Bowie (inventor of the "MLF (MultiLateral Force)" concept), Marshall Shulmann, Max Millican, Jerome Wiener, Fred C. Iklé), he had direct access to the highest level of the US Administration: for the first and last time of his career, although without any official French mandate, he tried to influence directly the political process by proposing ways to conciliate American and French opposing views.

Aron supported French nuclear effort, actually initiated by the Fourth Republic, but not the interpretation de Gaulle gave for it. Main critics by Aron of de Gaulle's military policy were the following: 1 - the search for military independence was anachronistic, especially if based on a second-rank - if not obsolete! - atomic capability which could form the basis for an offensive diplomacy; 2 - national resources were insufficient for a country of medium size like France: Great Britain itself, as the failure to develop the "Blue Streak" missile had proved, couldn't do it; 3 - atomic weapons



could not replace conventional forces as a diplomatic instrument (cf. Suez), and sacrificing those forces to the Bomb would deteriorate NATO deterrence power in Europe; 4 - French attitude would foster atomic "proliferation" which Aron, in accordance with the US, feared. 5. Last hidden but decisive argument: French nationalistic way could encourage Germany to search for nuclear status, which Aron, like his American friends, feared would be a *casus belli* with the USSR.

What did Aron positively recommend? Actually, having thoroughly deepened the theoretical basis of nuclear strategy from 1955 and beyond, Aron agreed with the Americans that "Massive retaliation" doctrine had to be replaced by a "flexible response posture" leaving room for the use of conventional forces and avoiding the potentially deadly "all-or-nothing" which could bring about a "war by misunderstanding" in Europe. The fundamental basis for this approach was the rediscovery of the clausewitzian dependency of strategy towards politics<sup>7</sup>: contrary to most commentators, Aron thought that Clausewitz's view were rejuvenated, and not abolished, in the nuclear world. Henceforth he rejected the French theories of "dissuasion proportionnelle". But he also reproached the US to refuse nuclear sharing. His preference actually went, *in the short term*: to a system of double-key to control nuclear weapons yielded to Europe by the US; *in the longer term*, to a European deterrence, the idea of which should be initiated by Great-Britain, and to which French nuclear arsenal should be only an introduction.

### Conclusion fear

From this short overview of Aron's positioning towards transatlantic crisis and misunderstandings, 3 lessons might be drawn.

*Continuity and globality of his Weltanschauung and primacy of politics.* Aron's strategic thought of course evolved and got richer due to a year-after-year effort to analyze problems and changing conditions, but the intellectual foundations were laid in 1945. They originated in his experience of the war from which he derived a complete and overall view of military problems in the modern age: insertion of military matters inside a broader social framework, demonstrated by Hans Delbrück,

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<sup>7</sup> Penser la guerre, Clausewitz, in 1976, will in this respect be the coronation of Aron's 40 years-long meditation on strategy.

and dependency of strategy to politics, asserted by Clausewitz, were the most stable basis for all subsequent works.

*A unique intellectual method.* Aron continuously went back and forth from day-to-day analysis of pending problems in *Le Figaro* or review articles, to the most abstract effort to theorize international relations and strategic policy in the nuclear policy: this always ensured both concrete and well-thought approaches.

*Balanced Atlanticism.* Aron was a strong patriot: when opposing his country's policy, he also severely criticized US certainties. Actually, his long term goal was not foreign to de Gaulle's concern: he also pursued the aim to restore Europe's strategic independence, the best mean in his mind to reach one day a negotiated settlement and the reunification of the Old Continent. But this goal seemed to him reachable only in the mid - or long term, and rather through European unification than purely national strategies.