

Loyal Principles: The Logic of a French Return to NATO After the Cold War

Paul Cormarie

It is curious that France decided to return closer to the NATO Alliance after the Cold War, in a notably calm and stable period for European security. It is even more striking to note that, 10 years later, France has become popularly perceived as a reluctant NATO ally and a staunch defender of the European Union's autonomy in strategic affairs. As such, this paper presents the case that the same pursuit of strategic autonomy is much older than commonly perceived. In fact, the quest for autonomy was the prime motivation for France in returning closer to NATO Alliance after the Cold War. This paper explores the historical facts related to the French rapprochement to NATO and explains the negotiations made at the time related to European autonomy. Altogether, it concludes that French foreign policy has selected different regional organizations in the post-Cold War period as avenues to build a common defense in Europe, be it through NATO or the EU.

Introduction

French President Emmanuel Macron's recent declarations after his state visit to the People's Republic of China have provoked significant pushback from the United States and his Eastern European partners. In an interview, he defended his goal of Strategic Autonomy on the Taiwan issue, which he qualified as "American escalation and Chinese overreaction." This statement came as a surprise to many observers who believed President Macron's vision of European autonomy to be "brain dead" – as the President had once labeled the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With Finland's accession into the Alliance and Sweden's bid to join, there are few EU members left that are not members of NATO.

While looking at France's historic relationship with NATO, Macron's statements may come as a surprise. France has been, with other members such as Spain, one of the few member countries not party to NATO's integrated command ever since its dramatic departure from NATO under

Charles de Gaulle in 1966. While France reassured allies that it would still contribute its forces to a contingency against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, it meant that French forces would be led independently from Allied command and that France could not sit at the table of NATO's military command. This would only change officially in 2009, under Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency, after a long process of negotiations that started at the end of the Cold War. After French reintegration into NATO Military Command, the newly elected Francois Hollande was publicly skeptical of the reintegration process but decided not to flip the decision despite pressures from his party. Ultimately, his successor, President Macron, proved to be more confrontational towards NATO in public declarations than his predecessor, yet has not left either.

In just ten years, France went from upending a 50-year-old stalemate and reintegrating NATO, to calling it "brain dead." As such, it might seem that the French return was a mistake and contrary to modern interpretations of Strategic Autonomy.

While most of the current literature centers around the question of whether Europe must become more autonomous from the U.S. defense umbrella, I argue that Strategic Autonomy is an age-old goal of French foreign policy that does not oppose membership in NATO. Further, this paper examines whether the French decision to rejoin NATO was because of, rather than despite, Strategic Autonomy.

To do so, I present a historical study of French foreign policy since the end of the Cold War which demonstrates a clear linear path: in developing a European defense structure that is separate from the United States by examining past declarations and analyses, we gain a broader understanding of why France rejoined NATO's integrated command, and its boasting of "autonomy" once inside.

By examining the French position historically, we can not only better understand the decisions made by President Macron's predecessors, but also the French meaning of the Alliance and European defense building. According to this study, Strategic Autonomy and membership in NATO are not opposed to the construction of a European defense but are merely a continuation of post-Cold War French foreign policy by other means.

Mitterrand's Shy Attempt

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, French President François Mitterrand believed that the United States would leave Europe, based on phone calls with Soviet Union General Secretary Gorbachev. During those calls, President Mitterrand thought that an alternative security arrangement with the Soviet Union was possible. Not long after, European leaders agreed on the Charter of Paris and transformed the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).¹

However, some decision-makers inside Mitterrand's administration believed that there was a change in strategic thinking in the United States after the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to some historians, the United States was looking into ways to make NATO "more European" as the Cold War was coming to an end. This belief led Mitterrand's foreign policy advisor, Admiral Lanxade, to hold discussions with Brent Scowcroft and then-National Security Council (NSC) staffer David Gompert.² During those talks, the United States had hoped that France would become a key part of NATO's transformation, whereas France, on the other hand, mostly remained passive to U.S. advances. The negotiations were parallel to those made under the "quad format" in the Autumn of 1990 between German, French, American, and British diplomats, which concluded that Europeans had to become "more responsible for their own defense."³

At the end of December 1990, the American Permanent Representative to NATO William Taft proposed to his French counterpart, Gabriel Robin, the "emergence

of a European Pillar in NATO, French reintegration into NATO, and the adaptation of structures.”⁴ At the time, the French foreign ministry was much more skeptical about American advances than its delegation to NATO, especially because of the preeminence of the U.S.-led Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Powers in Europe (SHAPE) in NATO’s politics. Contrary to the Defense Ministry and Admiral Lanxade, the Foreign Ministry believed that all efforts in creating any European force or defense entity would remain de facto “platonic.”⁵ Instead, the Foreign Ministry advocated for the Western European Union (WEU) – Europe’s own military alliance – to become the European pillar of NATO. Meanwhile, the U.K. and the United States wanted to give WEU a subsidiary role. As this disagreement became prevalent during negotiations, the United States grew less interested in the prospects of reintegration in early 1991. Specifically, disagreements grew over the possibility of a European pillar or entity having forces separate from NATO’s Integrated Command. While the US and UK proposed a separable, yet not separate force, France saw any such ideas as an insincere European pillar. The window for a possible agreement closed at the end of January 1991 when a French Foreign Ministry report mentioned that the “U.S. and U.K. positions do not respond to current challenges.” The lack of substantive convergence on what a transformed NATO would look like finally halted all discussions.⁶

The Treaty of Maastricht in 1992 truly kickstarted the changing French-NATO relationship. Immediately after signing the treaty, the Franco-German Summit of La Rochelle in May 1992 led to the creation of the *Eurocorps*, a Franco-German military unit, and outlined common goals of the

French-German strategic and defense cooperation and integration.⁷ These goals provoked discussions regarding *Eurocorps*’ operational status under NATO – given that the corps was composed of NATO-integrated Germans and non-integrated French. This difference led to a new series of discussions between Admiral Lanxade, his German counterpart, and the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe (SACEUR).⁸

Additionally, despite the Treaty of Maastricht’s promise to build a long-term vision of European defense, President François Mitterrand recognized that NATO would remain the dominant defense organization for the foreseeable future. “European defense,” he told U.S. President George H.W. Bush in the spring of 1991, “would remain ‘virtual’ for some time, whereas NATO would remain durably ‘real.’”⁹ At the same time, Admiral Lanxade believed that it was impossible to substitute NATO with a European organization – and instead, the alliance would have to evolve into a European-U.S. partnership.¹⁰

The Emergence of a Pro-NATO Bloc

In 1993, the right-wing Rally for the Republic party won the legislative elections, placing the French government in a state of ‘cohabitation’ under Mitterrand’s left-wing presidency. The new right-wing government made several changes to French national strategy and its relationship with NATO. By citing their “Gaullist” heritage, the government argued that changes in national security were a mere continuation of Cold War doctrine rather than a shift.¹¹ The consequent Defense White Paper of 1994 green-lit the participation of the Defense Minister in NATO’s North Atlantic

Council.¹² Additionally, in the Spring of 1993, a French representative was present at the Military Committee for all matters concerning “non-Article 5” activities in which France was involved – a first since 1966.¹³ All of these movements represented significant changes: while diplomats had guarded a strict policy of French exclusion since French withdrawal from NATO’s Integrated Command, the military was relatively more “Atlanticist” and desired closer links with other Western militaries.¹⁴ Following these developments, Jacques Chirac won the Presidency in 1995 and resumed efforts to deepen ties with NATO. Chirac was President Pompidou’s protégé and popularly perceived as a champion of modern Gaullism – a perception he particularly pushed during his electoral campaigns.¹⁵ While Presidents Giscard and Mitterrand, the two Presidents following Pompidou, were perceived as a technocratic reformer and a socialist, Chirac on the other hand was the first right-wing Gaullist to be elected since 1974. This success provided Chirac with considerably more credibility in the pro-Gaullist electorate, allowing him to renegotiate the French position in NATO and reformulate Gaullist doctrine.¹⁶

However, President Chirac was pressed to move ahead with French reintegration into NATO’s command early on due to changing strategic circumstances. Since the beginning of the War in Yugoslavia, the French military proposed a multilateral force that would take the form of the WEU, yet this proposal failed to materialize due to opposition from the U.K. and Germany.¹⁷ The U.K. saw any European force as a French-dominated force, while France saw the U.K. as being too U.S.-aligned. Meanwhile, Germany was too reticent in disrupting the status quo, as it was

prioritizing reunification with the East. Thus, President Chirac decided that the question of European defense could only be resolved within NATO as the end of the Cold War changed the geopolitical landscape.¹⁸ According to a senior German diplomatic officer in June 1996, the reason why the Chirac government suddenly became a proponent of NATO reintegration could be traced back to these adaptations in French foreign policy: “French President Jacques Chirac found a way to meld Gaullist national glory with transatlantic cooperation. As he assessed the end of the Cold War, the reunification of a powerful Germany, and the poor performance of the French military in the Gulf War, Mr. Chirac concluded that past French policy aimed at easing the United States out of Europe would be counterproductive.”¹⁹

Another key reason why Chirac became motivated to increase ties with NATO concerned state finances. His plan for military reform included the abandonment of conscription and a “professional” army based on the British model of an All-Volunteer-Force.²⁰ Meanwhile, key European governments like France began a “peace dividend” era, focusing on cuts in defense spending. Europeans at the time also braced for the economic impact of the Euro as the common currency, which was to be adopted by 1999.²¹ As a result, NATO became an attractive and cheap security provider for Europeans. The NATO Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF) in Bosnia was perceived in Paris as an efficient force that did not rely on independent equipment, and, as such, adhered less to the Gaullist philosophy of “self-sufficiency” in all weapons.²²

With these motivations in hand, Chirac began moving toward reintegration. During the December 1995 Ministerial of the North Atlantic Council (NAC), the French Foreign Minister outlined a path ahead for French-NATO relations. The French Defense Minister would regularly attend the NAC, permanently rejoin the Military Command, participate in the NATO Defense College and the Oberammergau Center, and begin a process of elevating relations with SHAPE.²³ However, this change did not include sending its commanders to attend meetings with the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe (SACEUR), the Supreme Allied Commander of the Atlantic (SACLANT), the Commander-in-Chief Allied Command Channel (CINCHAN), and the Canada United States Regional Planning Group (CUSRPG). As a result, French actions resembled a rapprochement, rather than a reentry, into NATO's Integrated Command.²⁴ And this rapprochement was motivated by economic gain and the strategic consequences of European defense building having been stalled yet again in the EU Treaty.

During his first state visit to the United States in February 1996, Jacques Chirac addressed Congress, where he praised American involvement alongside the Europeans in Bosnia. He also declared that NATO "had to adapt itself to a universe that is no longer that in which it was born," while calling for a stronger European pillar within NATO to better balance the organization away from the United States.²⁵ During his speech, Jacques Chirac proposed the European pillar of NATO to be a part of NATO that could be deployed without U.S. resources, including logistics, transmissions, and aerial surveillance.

Chirac and the AFSOUTH Roadblock

However, the following year would be marked by the Allied Forces South Europe (AFSOUTH) crisis, which was critical to the French given their leading role in the war in Yugoslavia and the French fleet's logistical importance to the operations in the subregion.²⁶ The French demand to place a European as head of the fleet trumped prospects for a compromise to adapt the structure of the Alliance by boosting the Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF). While the French did not move claims to AFSOUTH, they simultaneously sought to use the CJTF to further Europeanize NATO, reduce the weight of SHAPE, and increase the influence of the military committee.²⁷ As demonstrated in Bosnia, the lack of clarity behind NATO's political guidance in non-Article 5 operations necessitated reform of the Command Structure according to SACLANT Shaheen in February 1996.²⁸ As a result, the efforts related to defining a role for CJTF subsequently transformed into establishing a clearer relationship between political decision-making and deploying troops abroad – which the French were in favor of, according to former senior member of policy planning Gilles Andreani. The effort to establish CJTF as a political instrument rather than just a military instrument was part of broader efforts aimed at Europeanizing the Alliance, a strategy deemed unpopular inside the Pentagon.²⁹

In a New York Times Op-Ed in 1996, new French foreign minister Herve de Charette announced that France would be committed to participating in a new NATO in which Europeans would assume burden sharing, and would open to admitting new Eastern European countries while framing a new relationship with Russia. This commitment,

however, was conditional on attributing two regional commands to European officers.³⁰ According to another speech, this change particularly concerned the southern command due to the vital importance of the Mediterranean Sea, as seen by Paris.³¹ The view of a “Europeanized” NATO was also publicly supported by the French Defense Minister Charles Millon in a piece for *NATO Review* – suggesting a whole-of-government effort to create public support for European defense via NATO at the time. France was not alone on this front: these demands, in fact, were supported by Italy, Germany, and Spain.³²

In June 1996, the U.K. and the United States agreed on NATO reform, where they “approved the concept of combined joint task forces both to allow non-NATO countries to participate in NATO missions and to permit the use of U.S.-owned NATO assets in WEU-led operations in which U.S. forces would not participate.”³³

The consequent NATO Berlin Summit’s communique stated that:

“As an essential element of the development of this *European Security and Defence Identity* we will prepare, with the involvement of NATO and the WEU, for WEU-led operations including planning and exercising of command elements and forces.³⁴ It would be based on the identification of the types of separable but not separate capabilities that would be required to command and conduct WEU-led operations and an elaboration of appropriate multinational European command arrangements within NATO, consistent with and taking

full advantage of the CJTF concept, are able to prepare, support, command, and conduct WEU-led operations. This implies double-hatting appropriate personnel within the NATO command structure to perform these functions.”

At the end of the Berlin Summit, the French foreign minister declared: “France is satisfied. Today it is a new Alliance that is emerging, and in this new Alliance, France is ready to take its full place.”³⁵

Despite the optimism, the United States opposed the text and continued to express its opposition to the implementation of the proposals written and signed at the Summit.³⁶ Nor did the Berlin Summit see an agreement on SACEUR’s Deputy role.³⁷ This was vital considering that it generated debates around giving major responsibilities to European generals for NATO reform. On the 28th of August 1996, just a month after the Berlin Summit, Chirac sent an official letter to U.S. President Bill Clinton to manage tensions. Chirac requested AFSOUTH to be ceded to a European on grounds that it would create the conditions required for France to enter “a new NATO,” despite the failure of the Berlin Summit.³⁸ The Foreign Ministry and the Elysée had prioritized the political objective to “Europeanize” NATO to the point that, according to the press, French diplomats regularly interjected their interlocutors by saying “You mean the reformed NATO.”³⁹ French military leadership, however, thought first and foremost of national interest and pinpointed the AFSOUTH as a way to leverage key national interests.⁴⁰

In September 1996, President Chirac wrongly assumed the United States was

ready to concede to French aspirations, which was contradicted by a rebuttal letter from President Clinton that same month. However, in this same letter, the American President did propose to create more responsibilities for a European Deputy SACEUR. In essence, President Clinton refused the French proposal out of fear that Congressional opposition would spill over and derail his larger goal of NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe.⁴¹ German Chancellor Helmut Kohl would later support Chirac in a letter directed at President Clinton while noting that allowing for French and Spanish reintegration into the Alliance should be seen as just as much of a priority by the United States as Eastern European accessions.⁴² In November of the same year, Chirac met with the NSC members Anthony Lake and Alexander Vershbow to discuss NATO reform and repeated his demands for AFSOUTH. Yet, the NSC representatives maintained their position, despite the French threat to leave negotiations for NATO reintegration altogether. “For us to give up AFSOUTH would be perceived as the beginning of strategic retreat from the new NATO.”⁴³

In response to the roadblock on NATO reform, the French began to formulate less ambitious proposals, including a redrawing of the southern region and “a functional division of labor broadly on the lines of the ACE/AFCENT/ARRC (Allied Command Europe/ Allied Forces Central Europe/ Allied Command Europe Rapid Reaction Corps).”⁴⁴ Allies, however, agreed on the need to downsize the number of regional commanders – in support of their own spending cuts as part of the “peace dividends” era. The idea of Europeans maintaining European regional commands was criticized in Washington as an unviable

option to maintain an integrated command, and instead, designing common political goals across the Alliance was seen as more sustainable. For instance, as Henry Kissinger put it, “In the end, it is not the integrated command that generates unity, but a sense of shared political and security interests.”⁴⁵

American skepticism of French intentions on NATO reform was further explained by the actions of French diplomacy in the 1990s. According to a senior American diplomat, French representatives had developed a reputation for aggressively advancing their nation’s influence in diplomatic circles, while at the same time assuming greater leadership roles as a consequence of the French-German relationship. Therefore, French advances in the name of Europe were mostly perceived in American diplomatic circles as hypocritical attempts to boost the French role in NATO once they rejoined the integrated command.⁴⁶

During the Brussels Summit of December 1996, the U.S. proposal for a partnership council to replace the Partnership for Peace (PfP) was refused by the French as a way to apply pressure on the AFSOUTH issue after two refusals by President Clinton.⁴⁷ Consequently, during a January 1997 summit between NSA member Samuel Berger and his French counterpart Jean-David Levitte, Berger reported that there was “no real movement in the French approach to their reintegration in NATO,” and that their proposal for a solution was still about AFSOUTH, regardless of guarantees of any comfortable leadership position in the new NATO.⁴⁸ In an ultimate effort to save reintegration before the Madrid Summit, Jean-David Levitte met

with U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Shalikashvili to discuss a compromise. Levitte proposed that the Europeans would be in charge of “operational” command while the Americans would be in charge of “functional” command. Shalikashvili refused the final offer and proposed to discuss the matter again in six years – in 2003, a year before France rejoined SHAPE.⁴⁹

A compromise was finally struck: a European commander in waiting would take charge of the AFSOUTH in six years, until which it would be equal in authority to the current U.S. commander. Despite the reported agreement between Washington and Paris, the deal was soon canceled over political developments in France: Chirac had dissolved parliament to win a majority before the looming recession could impact the election the following year; he lost the election and was forced to accept a socialist government, which staunchly opposed a return to NATO’s integrated command.⁵⁰

In June 1997, a month before the Madrid Summit, European defense would see another significant upset during the Amsterdam Summit. Although the French government had been pushing for a deepening of the WEU, the U.K. blocked efforts to link the WEU to the EU because of their traditional policy of supporting NATO as the primary security institution in Europe.⁵¹ As a result, the ambitions of making the WEU a bridge for the EU into NATO died through the U.K. veto. The end of the French effort toward reintegration was thus confirmed by the defense minister in December 1997, where he underlined that France would remain a country in the Alliance but out of the integrated command

because of disagreements over shared responsibility of command.⁵²

Despite this upset, in a speech in 1998, President Chirac articulated his desire to see more integration in the EU on defense issues - while remaining in NATO.⁵³ Yet, following the Madrid Summit, no further efforts were made to push France back into the Alliance’s integrated command until after the Iraq War. The failure of the Madrid Summit, therefore, became one of the main reasons for President Chirac’s shift after 1997 to seek European defense through the EU rather than through NATO. The Saint-Malo agreement between France and the U.K. further resolved many security issues between both countries, paving the way for a new Amsterdam Treaty without British opposition and adding optimism to the idea that European Defense through the EU could still be possible.

Chirac After 9/11 and The Iraq War

The accession of several Eastern European countries into NATO after the Cold War further impacted the view of Jacques Chirac and other French politicians towards European defense. Paris saw NATO as an institution that would continue to exist despite the end of the Cold War and would continue to shape European defense long after.⁵⁴ With the September 11, 2001, Attacks and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq by U.S.-led forces, considerations of what NATO should become resurfaced.

Relations between Paris and Washington had reached their lowest point ever when President Chirac vetoed Turkey’s assistance to the war in Iraq through NATO; called for a “multipolar world”; and proposed creating

an independent European defense institution with Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. In Washington, these developments had convinced senior officials in the George W. Bush administration that France was intent on sabotaging NATO and constraining American interests – coincidentally at a time when U.S. foreign policy was considerably more hawkish.⁵⁵ The war in Iraq created a stark division within Europe as well. France and Germany were alone in their opposition, which led to the perception from Eastern European states that the U.S. was a more reliable “guardian of democracy.”⁵⁶ The split over an Iraq Invasion was the first time the EU and NATO did not have a common view, thereby complicating the choice of Eastern Europeans over which stance to take. Unlike the de facto Franco-German leadership of the EU, NATO’s official position on Iraq was a brief statement at the Prague Summit in November 2002, pledging “full support for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1441” and calling “on Iraq to comply fully and immediately with [...] all relevant UN Security Council resolutions.”⁵⁷

Despite diplomatic and political tensions, military relations between France and the United States remained good, notably during their cooperation in the Balkans and other peacekeeping missions.⁵⁸ However, punishment by isolation carried out during the Spring of 2003 led to 18 alliance members circumventing France’s veto and giving NATO protection to Turkey through NATO’s Defense Planning Committee, in which France had still no participation.⁵⁹ This action was unprecedented in the Alliance’s history.

Consequently, President Chirac allowed massive French participation in both the Allied Command Transformation (ACT) and NATO Response Force (NRF), both newly created in the same year. Furthermore, for the first time since 1966, France tried to appoint two generals to NATO’s International Military Committee but was blocked by U.S. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld.⁶⁰ After a meeting between the new French Defense Minister Michele Alliot Marie and Secretary Rumsfeld on January 2004, as well as threats by the Chief of the Armed Forces General Bentégeat to block French dues to NATO, Secretary Rumsfeld finally lifted his opposition.⁶¹

The two officers appointed to SHAPE eased most of the tensions between the two countries in the months and years that immediately followed. However, they both differed greatly on what the future of the Alliance would be. Disagreements regarded enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia, the expansion of the ISAF’s role in Afghanistan, and the political role of NATO. On the latter, France feared the Americans wanted to transform NATO into an “alliance of democracies” that would compete with the UN.⁶² The failure of the vote on the referendum on the Constitution for Europe, in addition to suffering from a stroke, would paralyze President Chirac for the rest of his term until Sarkozy’s win in 2007.

Sarkozy: Return to the Fold

The geopolitical environment of 2008 incorporated many new elements. Nicolas Sarkozy and his “Americo-phile” foreign policy won the Presidency in 2007, a disappointing record of both the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and

that of the “new” NATO began to emerge, and finally the increasing weight of France in troop contributions in NATO missions – specifically the Kosovo Force (KFOR).⁶³ President Sarkozy had explicitly announced very early in his term that he would seek to “normalize relations” with the US in 2007 during a conference with French Ambassadors. Sarkozy made clear he had two conditions for normalization: renewing and investing in CSDP and an explicit recognition by Washington of its role, and second, a rebalancing of responsibilities between the United States and Europe inside of the Alliance.⁶⁴ In short, advancing European defense, but this time by pursuing it outside of NATO reform.

For Sarkozy, the issue of NATO reintegration was much more about image than other political reasonings, especially because the steepest steps to reintegration were already overcome. But now the greater struggle was about timing: should U.S. recognition of the CSDP come before or after French reintegration?⁶⁵ In 2008, after Sarkozy had made a declaration reuttering his precondition for European defense, President Bush recognized that building a strong NATO Alliance also required a strong European defense capacity.⁶⁶ President Sarkozy said after the Summit that “this opens the door to renewed ties with NATO.”⁶⁷

President Sarkozy also evocated during an event in 2009 that the attempts made by Mitterrand and Chirac resulted in some progress but “France had not taken its seat in the western family.”⁶⁸ When questioned about his precondition on European defense, he bluntly responded: “It’s done.” Given that his administration had chosen to relaunch the CSDP after reintegration,

Sarkozy had commented that if efforts didn’t follow, it would only “be defense on paper.”⁶⁹ Importantly, the redistribution of roles proposed by the United States, if France reentered, were not the regional ones in Europe, and were given directly to French officers rather than to Europeans in general.

On the 17th of March, the French parliament voted in favor of reintegration with a majority of votes coming from the right, while most of the opposition came from the socialists - who denounced an “alignment” with the United States.⁷⁰ The process of “reintegration” began during the Summit on April 2009 at Strasbourg – in a ceremony commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Alliance. As a result of the redistribution of roles, the Allied Command Transformation became French, with a French officer becoming the Commanding officer of NATO’s Response Force (NRF). France, on the other hand, agreed to send 900 officers to SHAPE and to sit on the Defense Planning Committee.⁷¹

Hollande and Macron: The Return to the EU

The campaign and consequent Presidency of François Hollande, the first left-wing President since Mitterrand, openly questioned the purpose of French reintegration. There were three reasons for his skepticism: “reintegration was considered a symbol of alignment with the United States, there were doubts about the future of the CSDP, (...) and finally, the other fear was linked to the cost-effectiveness of the measure.”⁷² Despite an “Atlanticist” wing of the Socialist Party had welcomed Sarkozy’s decision to fully reintegrate in 2009, the party held a

convention on the issue ahead of the elections and concluded on a compromise to conduct a study if victorious to determine whether it should continue to be fully reintegrated or reverse its position. Then-candidate Hollande specified that he would demand an enhanced presence within the NATO military structure, as well as significant progress with regard to European defense as conditions for remaining part of the NATO military command.⁷³

Fulfilling his campaign promise, the newly-elected President Hollande then commissioned the former Foreign Minister Hubert Védrine to examine France's reintegration into NATO's command structure. Védre recommended the Elysée to remain in NATO because of the Alliance's influence over Europe. However, the "Védre report" also pressed the government to remain "vigilant" by pressing French national interests as well as pushing for European defense.⁷⁴

Following Hollande's presidency, the Macron-Trump relationship would shape the transatlantic community until 2020. Despite several successful meetings during 2017, tensions began to rise at the first NATO summit of the year, where President Trump called for Allies to devote 2% of their GDP to defense.⁷⁵

Shortly after, in June 2017, Germany and France, under the EU banner, announced forming the European Defense Fund (EDF), where they would pursue joint work on drones, military transports, and combined efforts to stabilize the African Sahel region while remaining in close collaboration with NATO.⁷⁶ This effort culminated in a "triangle" on defense issues at the EU level: the Permanent Structured Cooperation

(PESCO) formed in late 2017, along with Common Annual Review on Defense (CARD) and the EDF.⁷⁷

In September 2017, in a speech at Sorbonne University, often considered to be the cornerstone of President Macron's foreign policy doctrine, Macron announced his intent to continue to push for EU integration on defense as an autonomous, but complementary, initiative to NATO.⁷⁸

In direct reaction to these French efforts, a Pentagon official criticized the EU's CSDP for pulling forces away from NATO. Transatlantic tensions increased further throughout 2018, when the Trump administration irritated some European allies over pulling from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement, criticism over defense spending in NATO, and energy deals with Russia.⁷⁹ As the EU began to ramp up the EDF and its other defense initiatives, the United States also voiced opposition to restrictions that prevented non-EU countries from participating in new EU projects.⁸⁰ In an official letter signed in early 2019, the U.S. government said that limitations under consideration on the involvement of non-EU members amounted to "poison pills" and hinted at reprisals if European integration in defense was built without consulting the United States.⁸¹

After facing hostility from Washington, President Macron showed a more aggressive position. During the centenary of the WWI Armistice in November 2018, where Russian President Putin was the only head of state invited, he warned that Europeans could not be protected without a "true, European army."⁸² Whereas many contend that Macron had been responsible for a

seismic shift in Franco-U.S. relations, he did not fundamentally change anything in the relationship other than rhetoric. As seen through the Mitterrand, Chirac, Sarkozy, and Hollande Presidencies, French perception of European defense-building has remained particularly linear since the end of the Cold War. The current President has followed the same initiatives as his predecessors and follows a reactive approach to roadblocks formed by the broader geopolitical environment. When initiatives within the EU encounter a roadblock or geopolitical shifts, French Presidents resorted to building European defense through NATO, and vice versa.

The strategy of shifting international venues to better pursue national goals is called “Forum Shopping,” and the forum’s specific characteristics affect the actor’s goals.⁸³ Past attempts to build Strategic Autonomy via NATO necessarily incorporated the United States because of its weight in the Alliance. But current attempts via the EU are now distinctively excluding it because of the forum’s nature as a European, and not transatlantic, organization. Strategic Autonomy never reappeared or changed, but its formulation into policy changed because the EU has been a better avenue for defense-building than NATO in the eyes of Paris.

For the first time in 14 years, France took over the Presidency of the Council of the EU in January 2022. Despite the war in Ukraine taking precedence over long thought-over plans, France still brokered a record 130 agreements on a broad series of engagements, notably in common defense and supporting an EU defense white paper — “the Strategic Compass.”⁸⁴ France also put into practice one of the mechanisms of the Compass: the European Peace Facility,

an off-budget fund worth approximately €5 billion for the period 2021-2027, financed through contributions from EU member states; the facility was used extensively at the beginning of the war to finance munitions for Ukraine.⁸⁵ Thus, France successfully led the EU into becoming a net exporter of security in the region for the first time in its history. Instead of representing a new roadblock, the war in Ukraine proved to become an accelerator for European autonomy.

At the same time, however, the Madrid Summit and the War in Ukraine have convinced many Eastern European states to call for additional U.S. presence on Europe’s Eastern flank. As the EU had been ramping up a security role under the French presidency, NATO had also expanded its enhanced Forward Presence to four additional countries and increased the size of its four multinational battlegroups already present.⁸⁶ While the EU is becoming more confident in its vision of security, Europe, as a whole, is still an importer of U.S. defense.

Coincidentally, President Macron has spearheaded a new initiative since 2022: the European Political Community. It is unclear what role this initiative accomplishes, other than being an alternative “means of structuring the continent.”⁸⁷ According to the “forum-shopping” practice demonstrated by French leadership across this paper, this could be the next forum through which French leadership tries to build autonomy, if it grows frustrated by the EU as an avenue of common defense-building.

Conclusion

The French reintegration into NATO's integrated command appears to be a natural movement that followed key events and concessions in post-Cold War Europe. Unlike Spain and other European countries that had also reintegrated into the Alliance during the same period, the French experience is unique because of its simultaneous attempt to reshape European security. France has never left its foreign policy doctrine, but against multiple roadblocks, Paris adapted its position over NATO and EU defense integration: when one avenue did not work, it resorted to the other. Today, after a perceived failure to move NATO toward a European pillar, French efforts have resorted to the EU to build a 'Europe of Defense.' With the

Russia-Ukraine war, NATO has returned to the forefront of European defense, and according to this study, France will likely seek to find compromises that maintain NATO's role as the first security actor on the continent in exchange for further measures that would allow, in the long term, a 'civil divorce' from the United States in defense.

About the Author: *Paul Cormarie holds a Master of Science in Foreign Service from Georgetown University. He is a former Researcher at NATO Parliamentary Assembly and junior researcher at the Atlantic Council. A portion of this research was undertaken under the guidance of Dr. Sara Moller, Professor at Georgetown University.*

-
- ¹ Record of conversation between Mikhail Gorbachev and Francois Mitterrand (excerpts). <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16133-document-19-record-conversation-between>.
- ² Frédéric Bozo, “Un Rendez-Vous Manqué? La France, Les États-Unis et l’Alliance Atlantique : 1990-1991.” *Relations Internationales*, no. 120 (2004): 419–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45342447>.
- ³ Frédéric Bozo, p. 425.
- ⁴ Frédéric Bozo, p. 424.
- ⁵ Frédéric Bozo, p. 426.
- ⁶ Frédéric Bozo, p. 428.
- ⁷ Statement on the establishment of a Franco-German European Army Corps (La Rochelle, 22 May 1992). https://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/statement_on_the_establishment_of_a_franco_german_european_army_corps_la_rochelle_22_may_1992-en-a1cbc2bd-51da-4ef8-b7e5-07b1bc86e978.html.
- ⁸ Jacques Lanxade, « Quand le Monde a basculé », NiL éditions, Paris, 2001. p. 261.
- ⁹ Frédéric Bozo, “‘Winners’ and ‘Losers’: France, the United States, and the End of the Cold War.” *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (2009): 927–56. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44214054>. p. 954.
- ¹⁰ Jacques Lanxade, « Quand le Monde a basculé », NiL éditions, Paris, 2001. p. 261.
- ¹¹ Anand Menon, p. 60.
- ¹² Jean-Marie Guehenno, “Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale 2013.” <http://www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/le-livre-blanc-sur-la-defense-1994.pdf>
- ¹³ Pichovszky Domonkos, « France et l’OTAN 1949-1997 : épisodes d’une relation orageuse, » Library of Congress.
- ¹⁴ Jacques Lanxade, p. 343
- ¹⁵ François Huguenin, “Jacques Chirac était-il gaulliste?” *Le Figaro*, 4 October 2019. <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/politique/jacques-chirac-etait-il-gaulliste-20191004>.
- ¹⁶ Anand Menon, “Domestic Constraints on French NATO Policy.” P. 60.
- ¹⁷ Pichovszky Domonkos, « France et l’OTAN 1949-1997 : épisodes d’une relation orageuse, » Library of Congress. p. 41.
- ¹⁸ Pichovszky Domonkos, p. 40.
- ¹⁹ Elizabeth Pond, “NATO Attempts a Second Creation,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 4, 1996. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB833820628182502000>.
- ²⁰ Ronald Tiersky, “A Likely Story: Chirac, France-NATO, European Security, and American Hegemony.” *French Politics and Society* 14, no. 2 (1996): P.2. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42844543>.
- ²¹ Ronald Tiersky, p. 3.
- ²² Ronald Tiersky, p. 3.
- ²³ Vie Publique, “Déclaration et conférence de presse de M. Hervé de Charette, ministre des affaires étrangères, sur l’élargissement de l’Alliance atlantique, l’adaptation de ses structures, et le retour de la France dans certaines instances de l’OTAN, Bruxelles le 5 décembre 1995.” 5th December 1995, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/226019-declaration-et-conference-de-presse-de-m-herve-de-charette-ministre-de>.
- ²⁴ Pichovszky Domonkos, p. 41.
- ²⁵ Steven Erlanger, “Chirac Offers a Vision of NATO; Few in Congress Come to Listen” *New York Times*, Feb. 2, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/02/world/chirac-offers-a-vision-of-nato-few-in-congress-come-to-listen.html>.
- ²⁶ JFC Naples, “Brief Overview,” <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/page6322744/brief-overview>.
- ²⁷ Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, “Reconcilable Differences: U.S.-French Relations in the New Era” *Brookings Institution Press*, November 2001. p. 57.
- ²⁸ Douglas Berenson, “As France Explores Full Reentry to NATO . . . : FRANCE SEES UTILITY IN GEN. SHEEHAN’S NATO REFORM PROPOSAL.” *Inside the Pentagon* 12, no. 6 (1996): p.16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43990510>.
- ²⁹ Douglas Berenson, p. 16.
- ³⁰ Hervé de Charette, “France for a Streamlined NATO: Setting the Record Straight” *New York Times*, December 10, 1996. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/10/opinion/IHT-france-for-a-streamlined-natosetting-the-record-straight.html>.
- ³¹ NATO, « Intervention du Ministre des Affaires étrangères de la France, Hervé de Charette, devant le Conseil Atlantique. » <https://www.nato.int/docu/speech/1997/s970218c.htm>.

-
- ³² Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, “Reconcilable Differences: U.S.-French Relations in the New Era,” *Brookings Institution Press*, November 2001. p. 50; Pichovszky Domonkos, p. 43.
- ³³ Jane M. O. Sharp, “British Views on NATO Enlargement,” 7 October 1997, <https://www.nato.int/acad/conf/enlarg97/sharp.htm> and Jolyon Howorth, “La France, l’OTAN et la sécurité européenne : statu quo ingérable renouveau introuvable,” *Politique étrangère*, HIVER 2002-2003, Vol. 67, No. 4 (HIVER 2002-2003), pp. 1001-1016. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42676018>.
- ³⁴ Final Communiqué, Ministerial Meeting of the NAC Berlin, 3 June 1996, <https://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1996/p96-063e.htm>.
- ³⁵ Hervé de Charette, « La Politique étrangère de la France », Press Conference of the Foreign Minister, Berlin, 16 June 1996.
- ³⁶ Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, “Dear Jacques, Cher Bill” *Plon*, 1999, p. 185.
- ³⁷ Pichovszky Domonkos, p. 43
- ³⁸ Delafon, Gilles and Thomas Sancton, “Dear Jacques, Cher Bill” *Plon*, 1999, p. 213.
- ³⁹ “Idealists aim for harmony through NATO reform” *Politico*, September 18, 1996. <https://www.politico.eu/article/idealists-aim-for-harmony-through-nato-reform/>.
- ⁴⁰ Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, p. 56.
- ⁴¹ Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, p. 214.
- ⁴² Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, p. 217.
- ⁴³ Declassified documents, p. 193.
- ⁴⁴ Michael Brenner and Guillaume Parmentier, p. 55.
- ⁴⁵ “What Does Jacques Want?” 1996, *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB849570449546341500>.
- ⁴⁶ Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, p. 196.
- ⁴⁷ Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, p. 257.
- ⁴⁸ Declassified Documents. p. 208
- ⁴⁹ Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, p. 268.
- ⁵⁰ Gilles Delafon and Thomas Sancton, p. 285.
- ⁵¹ Andrew Moravcsik and Kalypso Nicolaidis, “Explaining the Treaty of Amsterdam: Interests, Influence, Institutions” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, March 1999. p.74. <https://www.princeton.edu/~amoravcs/library/amsterdam.pdf>.
- ⁵² NATO « Intervention du ministre français de la Défense, Alain Richard à la session des ministres de la Défense de l’OTAN », December 1997, https://www.nato.int/cps/fr/natohq/opinions_25510.htm?selectedLocale=fr.
- ⁵³ 26th of August, « Discours de Monsieur Jacques Chirac, Président de la République » <https://www.elysee.fr/jacques-chirac/1998/08/26/discours-de-monsieur-jacques-chirac-president-de-la-republique-sur-la-maitrise-des-effets-de-la-mondialisation-lintegration-europeenne-et-les-poles-regionaux-de-solidarite-sur-la-reforme-de-lotan-et-la-securite-europeenne-les-relations-avec-les-et>.
- ⁵⁴ Maurice Vaïsse, “La France et l’OTAN : Une Histoire.” *Politique Étrangère* 74, no. 4 (2009). p. 869. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42715700>.
- ⁵⁵ Jim Hoagl, “Chirac's Temptation”, February 27, 2003. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2003/02/27/chiracs-temptation/7036a1f3-9c97-4773-a568-cd5051590785/?utm_term=.d091d8be16a7.
- ⁵⁶ Tassos E Fakiolas, p. 300.
- ⁵⁷ “Prague Summit Statement on Iraq” NATO, 2002. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_19551.htm.
- ⁵⁸ Henri Vernet and Thomas Cantaloube, p. 319.
- ⁵⁹ Karen DeYoung, “Chirac Calls Bush As France Seeks To Mend Relations,” *Washington Post*, April 16, 2003. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2003/04/16/chirac-calls-bush-as-france-seeks-to-mend-relations/04c92204-68bd-4b38-a5cf-272ab16b970d/>.
- ⁶⁰ Henri Vernet and Thomas Cantaloube, p. 319.
- ⁶¹ Henri Vernet and Thomas Cantaloube, p. 321.
- ⁶² Bozo, Frederic, “A History of the Iraq Crisis,” *Woodrow Wilson Center Press*; 2016: p. 308.
- ⁶³ David, Dominique, “France/OTAN: La Dernière Marche.” *Politique Étrangère* 73, no. 2 (2008): p. 436. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42715505>.
- ⁶⁴ Dominique David, p. 437.
- ⁶⁵ Dominique David, p. 440.
- ⁶⁶ White House, “President Bush Visits Bucharest, Romania, Discusses NATO” April 2, 2008. <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080402-2.html>.
- ⁶⁷ Gisela Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet, p. 8.

-
- ⁶⁸ Laurent Zecchini, « OTAN : les justifications de Nicolas Sarkozy » *Le Monde*, 12 March 2009. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2009/03/12/otan-les-justifications-de-m-sarkozy_1166809_3210.html.
- ⁶⁹ Laurent Zecchini, *Le Monde*.
- ⁷⁰ INA, « Débat sur l'Otan à l'Assemblée nationale » 19 20 *Edition nationale* – 17th of March 2009. <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclaire-actu/video/3862209001006/debat-sur-l-otan-a-l-assemblee-nationale>.
- ⁷¹ Natalie Nougayrède, “La France parachève son retour dans l'OTAN » *Le Monde*, 4th February 2009. https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2009/02/04/la-france-paracheve-son-retour-dans-l-otan_1150483_3210.html.
- ⁷² Jean-Pierre Maulny. “French NATO Policy under François Hollande.” *Atlantisch Perspectief* 36, no. 4 (2012): p. 10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48580987>.
- ⁷³ Jean-Pierre Maulny, p. 10.
- ⁷⁴ French Mission to NATO, “The Védrine report”, November 2012. <https://otan.delegfrance.org/Le-rapport-Vedrine>.
- ⁷⁵ Phillippe Le Corre, “Macron’s trans-Atlantic moment” Brookings, June 1st, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/06/01/macrons-transatlantic-moment/>; and “Donald Trump tells NATO allies to pay up at Brussels talks,” *BBC News*, May 25, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-40037776>.
- ⁷⁶ “Germany, France drafting details of defense fund: German minister,” Reuters, June 10, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-defence-germany-france-idUSKBN1910H4>.
- ⁷⁷ Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, “Can France and Germany Make PESCO Work as a Process Toward EU Defense?” German Marshall Fund, <https://www.gmfus.org/news/can-france-and-germany-make-pesco-work-process-toward-eu-defense>.
- ⁷⁸ “Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text / English version” Ouest France, September 26, 2017. <https://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.
- ⁷⁹ Tomas Valasek, “European defense vs. NATO: Not the right fight,” *Politico*, February 16, 2018. <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-defense-vs-nato-not-the-right-fight/>; “Nato’s painful homecoming” BBC News, June 7, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44389795>.
- ⁸⁰ Erik Brattberg and Tomas Valasek, “EU Defense Cooperation: Progress Amid Transatlantic Concerns,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, November 21, 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/11/21/eu-defense-cooperation-progress-amid-transatlantic-concerns-pub-80381>.
- ⁸¹ Robin Emmott, “Pentagon warns EU against blocking U.S. companies from defence pact,” Reuters, May 14, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-eu-defence/pentagon-warns-eu-against-blocking-u-s-companies-from-defence-pact-idUKL5N22Q5YQ>.
- ⁸² “France’s Macron pushes for ‘true European army,’” *BBC News*, November 6, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46108633>.
- ⁸³ Hannah Murphy, Aynsley Kellow, “Forum Shopping in Global Governance: Understanding States, Business and NGOs in Multiple Arenas” *Global Policy*, Volume 4, Issue 2, May 2013, pp. 139-149.
- ⁸⁴ Georgina Wright, “Overall, the French EU Council Presidency was a success... but not everyone agrees,” CEPS, July 20, 2022. <https://www.ceps.eu/overall-the-french-eu-council-presidency-was-a-success-but-not-everyone-agrees/>.
- ⁸⁵ Maia de la Baume, “EU agrees to give €500M in arms, aid to Ukrainian military in ‘watershed’ move” *Politico*, February 27, 2022. <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-ukraine-russia-funding-weapons-budget-military-aid/>.
- ⁸⁶ “NATO’s military presence in the east of the Alliance,” NATO, December 21, 2022. https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_136388.htm.
- ⁸⁷ Virginie Malingre, “The European Political Community looks to find its meaning,” *Le Monde*, May 26, 2023. https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/26/the-european-political-community-looks-to-find-its-meaning_6028130_4.html.