

NATO's "French Connection": *Plus ça change...?*

By Leo Michel¹

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Will the next French president's NATO agenda differ from his or her predecessor's? The ongoing campaign has yielded few clues. True, France's role in NATO has not been at forefront of presidential contests since 1981, when then socialist leader François Mitterrand adopted the Gaullist formula of *indépendance dans l'Alliance*. And this year's spirited race, dominated by thorny economic and social issues (e.g., the meaning of "national identity") is no exception.

Indeed, in their few interventions on defense policy, the leading candidates—the center-right's Nicolas Sarkozy, socialist standard-bearer Ségolène Royal, and centrist François Bayrou—sound remarkably similar themes. While stressing a "holistic" approach to security, they acknowledge that France and its European partners must transform their militaries to face 21st century threats from proliferation, terrorism, failed states and regional conflicts. France, they declare, will remain a "loyal" Alliance member but resist "temptations" (attributed to Washington) to make NATO a "global gendarme." They pledge to press harder to develop "autonomous" European defense cooperation within the EU. And, as a basis for acting multilaterally (preferably under a UN mandate) or alone (if necessary to fulfill France's bilateral commitments or defend its "vital interests"), they promise to modernize the professional armed forces and independent nuclear deterrent while keeping defense expenditures relatively constant.

Hence, analysts of French defense policy can be forgiven for their prevailing *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* assessments. But could they be wrong? While no U-turns seem likely, the winner of the May 6 run-off might resurrect the soothing formula of *le changement dans la continuité* (attributed to Georges Pompidou) to reshape French policy regarding two near-term challenges—the NATO-EU relationship and France's role in NATO-ISAF—and, over the longer-term, to re-evaluate the level of French participation in NATO structures. It would be a nuanced evolution, to be sure, in keeping with the decades-long tug-of-war between Gaullist pride and Cartesian logic. But this observer, for one, is betting on Descartes.

Past as prelude?

France's relationship with NATO has always been complex and multidimensional—a virtual Rubik's cube of the country's shifting domestic politics, leadership personalities, regional

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and global ambitions, and willingness to challenge and/or cooperate with the United States and other key partners. More than once, appearances have been deceiving. For example:

- In the early 1950s, France hosted NATO's key political and military bodies, held key command posts, and enjoyed a privileged position in military planning (along with the British) through a "permanent group" in the Pentagon. In 1954, however, some French officers were already voicing fears that, absent its own nuclear forces, France's role in NATO would amount to a "U.S. protectorate."
- General de Gaulle returned to power in 1958 determined to restore French "independence" and "grandeur," and made clear that NATO would not be a lasting feature of his "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals" vision. He especially opposed NATO's integrated military structure, believing "the integrated country loses interest in its national defense, since it is not responsible for it." Yet within 18 months of de Gaulle's decision in March 1966 to remove France from the military structure, the Supreme Allied Commander for Europe (SACEUR) and French military leaders had negotiated guidelines for intelligence sharing, French participation in NATO exercises, and contingency plans for employment of French forces under NATO command and Allied access to French territory if Article 5 (the collective defense provision of the 1949 Washington Treaty) were invoked.
- Since the early 1990s, socialist and conservative-led governments have progressively shed much of the Gaullist heritage with regard to NATO even when their rhetoric sometimes suggested otherwise. Despite lingering taboos, France today participates in NATO's operations and structures in ways deemed implausible even a few years ago. Sign of the times: In his commentary on the eve of the November 2006 NATO Summit, President Jacques Chirac (who first gained national prominence as a junior minister during de Gaulle's presidency) unabashedly stated his intention to "reaffirm the pre-eminent role of the Atlantic Alliance, a military organization, guarantor of the collective security of the allies, and a forum where Europeans and Americans can combine their efforts to further peace."

To be sure, the French *rapprochement* with NATO has not been a one-way street. NATO, too, has transformed itself in profound ways since the end of the Cold War through enlargement (from 15 Allies in 1989 to 26 Allies and 23 Partners today), major expeditionary operations from the Balkans to Afghanistan (with limited but important missions from Darfur to Pakistan), and impressive—although the French would argue incomplete—reforms of its military and civilian structures. At the same time, as an alliance of sovereign countries, NATO has developed customary practices—including its consensus-based decision making—that allow nations considerable discretion to determine the parameters of their participation in its structures and activities. This applies as well to NATO's "force generation" process, which in practice takes place under close political oversight rather than the *automaticité* (i.e., quasi-automatic delegation of "NATO-earmarked" forces to SACEUR) dreaded by the French. France might seek out (or attract) more attention to its *statu spécifique* than other European Allies, but it is not the only Alliance member to have carved out some sort of special consideration. In the end, other Allies have accommodated *l'exception française* where they have calculated that qualified

French participation was, on balance, better than none—a point often forgotten in debates over whether France’s NATO *à la carte* policy is inherently “unfair” to fellow Allies.

Such legacies can be a hindrance to the new president, but they also can be a help. It would be harder to show flexibility in the future if ample precedent had not been set by more than one predecessor.

NATO-EU Relations

The Chirac government’s approach to a range of NATO-related issues has been heavily influenced by its vision and priorities for the EU’s European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). For Paris, ESDP is more than the goal set forth in the 1998 St. Malo joint declaration of Chirac and Prime Minister Tony Blair, which stated that the EU “must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed up by credible military forces, the means to decide to use them and a readiness to do so, in order to respond to international crises.” From a French perspective, ESDP also represents both a successful model and a potential catalyst for building European solidarity, cooperation, and sense of identity across a range of non-defense issues. Moreover, it is an area where France is seen to exert a leadership role within the EU—an even more important consideration for the French government following their voters’ rejection, in 2005, of the proposed Treaty Establishing a Constitution for Europe (TCE) for reasons that had little to do with ESDP.

Still, finding a judicious balance between their respective equities in NATO and EU has never been an easy task for the French. In 1999-2002, as the EU put in place key ESDP policymaking and military advisory structures, French officials paid especially close attention to avoiding any hint of EU dependence on, deference to, or lack of “autonomy” vis-à-vis NATO. For example, they were quick to reject then Secretary of Defense William Cohen’s proposal in October 2000 to establish a combined and fully reciprocal NATO-EU defense planning process as part of a wider effort to establish close cooperation between the two organizations. Nevertheless, while promoting ambitious targets for ESDP, French officials also acknowledged early on that their (then) 18 EU partners who were also NATO Allies did not see ESDP as an alternative to the Alliance. As then Defense Minister Alain Richard put it in 2001: “No European country would have agreed to join in the construction of a European defense if it was to lead to a loosening of the transatlantic link.”

This realization did not prevent Paris from pushing initiatives aimed at underscoring EU independence from NATO. In April 2003, for example, it joined with Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg to propose the creation of a separate EU operational planning headquarters—a move that other Allies, especially the United States, criticized as duplication of SHAPE. But while the substance of the related debate was not trivial, its shrill tone clearly was a product of the deeper transatlantic and intra-European rift over the Iraq war. By late 2004, that rift showed signs of healing, and NATO and the EU were working closely on a transition of peacekeeping responsibilities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, where France remained an important troop contributor.

More recently, French officials appear to have developed a two-pronged approach to NATO-EU cooperation. In public statements, they accept the basic logic of such cooperation:

of the now 27 EU member states, 25 belong either to NATO or Partnership for Peace (PFP), and each has one set of military forces and, equally important, one defense budget to serve national missions and those conducted under NATO, EU, UN or “coalition of the willing” auspices. French officials emphasize the need for NATO-EU *complémentarité* in developing defense capabilities, arguing that ESDP-led efforts to build European capabilities are essential to strengthen NATO’s “European pillar.” And while hailing NATO-EU cooperation in the field, especially in Bosnia-Herzegovina, they suggest a clearer division of labor between the two. As Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie has put it: “NATO is better equipped to handle heavy and long-lasting operations, when the United States is involved. ESDP is better equipped for ‘lightning’ and civil-military operations.”

Behind the scenes, however, reports of French resistance to closer NATO-EU ties have become commonplace. For example:

- According to knowledgeable European officials, in mid-2003 there was little, if any, discussion in EU councils on whether to consult with NATO on the French-led EU operation in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The primary reason was French aversion to doing so and their willingness, if necessary, to lead an operation outside the EU. Similarly, in May 2005, French officials mounted early resistance to NATO’s involvement in assisting African Union (AU) monitors in Darfur, preferring to channel such assistance through the EU.
- France blocked a proposal to hold a major NATO Response Force (NRF) field exercise, scheduled for 2006, in Mauritania, apparently out of concern that it would overshadow the EU’s increased outreach toward Africa. (France eventually acquiesced to holding the exercise on the island of Cap Verde and participated in the event.) Ironically, NRF exercises can directly benefit the EU’s smaller and less capable “battlegroups,” as European Allies draw from essentially the same limited pool of forces for both of these multilateral and rapid response formations.
- According to European officials, French officials have maneuvered to limit the scope of information exchanges and joint work on specific projects within the NATO-EU Capabilities Group. British and Dutch officials reportedly have been at odds with the French over the work and budget of the EU’s European Defense Agency (EDA), in part because of concern that certain French-backed projects were duplicating efforts within NATO. Similarly, French officials first delayed the establishment in 2005 of NATO and EU military liaison cells in each other’s respective headquarters and then sought to tightly limit their role.
- France reportedly has been cool toward formal discussions between NATO’s North Atlantic Council (NAC) and the EU’s Political and Security Committee (PSC) on strategic issues beyond cooperation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, although it has participated in occasional informal meetings of foreign ministers from NATO and EU member states. On at least one occasion, Paris blocked an informal NAC-PSC discussion (on terrorism), with a French diplomat commenting to the press that “we do not want NATO to involve itself in everything and impose its agenda on the EU.”

To be clear, blame for the failure of NATO and the EU to work together properly, despite their December 2002 declaration of a “strategic partnership,” cannot be laid entirely at the French doorstep. Turkey, a NATO Ally, does not recognize the government of Cyprus, an EU member state. This has led to contentious debates over the sharing of information between the two organizations and the format and agendas of formal and informal meetings.

That said, when NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer recently observed that “(s)ome deliberately want to keep NATO and the EU at a distance from one another,” there was little doubt among European security *cognescenti* that his remark was aimed principally at Paris. And while many in French officialdom have been keen to play down difficulties in the NATO-EU relationship, General Jean-Louis Georgelin, Chief of the Armed Forces Staff, seemed to acknowledge their importance when he told staff officers in October 2006: “The question of relations between NATO and the EU is complex. It must mobilize all our capacity for reflection. *It is, in my view, the major strategic question in terms of capabilities, organization, and political control that must guide our thoughts on our military tool and relations with our Allies (emphasis added.)* We must continue to work to maintain an equilibrium base on each institution’s autonomy of decision making, respecting their differences, and focusing on operational effectiveness.”

The next president might consider several reasons to heed General Georgelin’s advice and shelve the “zero sum game” attitude that regularly surfaces in Brussels. Foremost among these is the impending expansion of NATO-EU interdependency in ongoing crisis management operations.

In Kosovo, France, to its credit, has been a leader within the EU in supporting UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari’s proposal that the UN protectorate accede to independence, initially under international supervision. While NATO-EU cooperation in Bosnia-Herzegovina no doubt provides important “lessons learned,” the Bosnian model cannot simply be replicated in Kosovo, where some 16,000 (including 2,000 French) military personnel in the NATO-led KFOR continue to ensure security. The PSC recently decided to deploy (assuming a UN mandate) a significant ESDP civilian mission of approximately 1,300-1,500 personnel (mostly police, judges, prosecutors and customs officials) during Kosovo’s transition to full sovereignty. KFOR would retain overall responsibility for security in Kosovo (and, thus, a significant number of troops), shifting its emphasis over time to assisting Kosovar authorities to set up modest defense structures, train a territorial security force, and prepare for PFP membership. But Kosovo also could create another precedent, as one sees signs of U.S. interest in participating in the prospective ESDP civilian mission. Hence, a solid political understanding between NATO and the EU, backed up with specific arrangements on how the two organizations would provide mutual support, will be necessary.

Increased NATO-EU cooperation in Afghanistan is likely, as well. NATO-ISAF’s current force of some 37,000 (including 1,100 French) military personnel is expected to grow by several thousand over the coming months. Meanwhile, the EU and its member states have committed to provide Afghanistan some 3.7 billion Euros in development assistance since 2005. In November 2006, the EU Commission approved some 10.6 million Euros to support the

delivery of services and improved governance under the NATO-led Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in regions outside Kabul. In addition, the EU Council's General Secretariat is planning a possible ESDP police mission to Afghanistan, comprised of some 160 personnel, beginning in June 2007. As the EU's profile increases, it will require close coordination with NATO-ISAF, for example, on security and logistical arrangements for EU personnel and programs. This will be especially true as part of the ESDP police deployment will be working within the PRTs.

To handle such complex operations, NATO and the EU need to cooperate closely in planning and integrating the application of civilian and military capabilities. The French mantra that NATO must remain an exclusively "military organization" conflicts with the facts on the ground today, as NATO soldiers in the Balkans and Afghanistan already are conducting civil-military missions from school and road construction to health care for civilian populations. Moreover, there is in truth little appetite among the Allies, including the United States, or in the Secretary General's office to transform NATO into a civilian relief or reconstruction agency.

Fortunately, the basis for a more forthcoming French approach arguably exists already. France agreed to the November 2006 Riga Summit Declaration that recognizes the need "to improve coherent application of NATO's own crisis management instruments as well as practical cooperation at all levels with partners, the UN and other relevant international organizations, Non-Governmental Organizations and local actors in the planning and conduct of ongoing and future operations." Moreover, similar language can be found in the EDA's "Long-term Vision" (LTV) document, which states that: "(T)he increasing complexity of ESDP operations—with the concurrent characteristics of multinationality, expedition and asymmetry—call for an integrated and comprehensive approach to the planning and conduct of interventions. The role of the military will be determined within a wider campaign plan that includes close consultation with other—civil—instruments of power and influence."

In short, the paradox inherent in the French attitude to date—arguing within NATO against efforts to better integrate civilian and military components of stabilization operations, while simultaneously obstructing closer cooperation between NATO and the EU (which prides itself on its blend of civilian and military crisis-management tools)—hardly seems sustainable. At a minimum, it risks compromising the operations where France's major European partners are, in some cases, even more heavily invested. It also risks weakening the ability of the two organizations to work together in crisis prevention or in support of other international actors, such as the UN or, in Darfur, the AU.

Similarly, a French review of their rather restrictive approach to NATO-EU cooperation on capabilities development should not be excluded. On one hand, the French have emphasized the EU's role in building Europe's capabilities and strengthening its defense technology and industrial base. At the same time, the LTV makes clear that the capability and interoperability requirements for future ESDP military operations will be very similar, if not identical, to NATO's. Both NATO- and EU-led capability goals are challenged by relatively low and, in some cases, declining European defense budgets. As the cost of military modernization grows, and as many defense ministries are forced to shave investment accounts to pay for operational commitments, France's European partners are becoming even more attentive to efficient use of

resources. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear officials from a number of EU governments chafe *sotto voce* at reported French attempts to minimize joint NATO-EU technical work in setting capability priorities, requirements and standards.

Moreover, while overall levels of French defense spending are, with the British, among the top in Europe—between 1.7 to 2.2 percent of GDP for the French, depending on whether gendarmerie costs are included—the Rue Saint-Dominique is hardly flush with Euros. Top French armaments officials have acknowledged the importance of transatlantic cooperation, particularly within the NATO context, for their procurement policy of “competitive autonomy.” European firms with major French shareholders (such as Thales, Alcatel-Lucent and EADS) have been very active in key NATO programs, notably Allied Ground Surveillance, Air Command and Control System, and NATO’s satellite communications. That France hosts NATO’s Research and Technology Agency (headquartered in a Paris suburb) also reflects its interest in cooperation within the Alliance context. And while the transatlantic defense industrial relationship is far from ideal and too often buffeted by disputes over technology transfer and mutual market access, there is no logical reason why improved NATO-EU cooperation on capabilities cannot be a “win-win” situation for France and its European partners.

For the new French government, addressing dysfunctional aspects of the NATO-EU relationship no doubt will seem a lesser priority than deciding the future shape of EU institutions, which was left in doubt by the French and Dutch referenda in 2005 that rejected the TCE. That said, were the new government to survey its diplomatic and military representatives in Brussels and other European capitals, it might receive confirmation from a number of EU partners, especially the United Kingdom and Germany, of growing impatience with perceived French “below the radar” opposition to close NATO-EU links. This can hardly serve a new president’s interest in maintaining strong ties with Germany’s coalition government. And a future British government led by Labor’s Gordon Brown or, eventually, the Conservative’s David Cameron might be significantly less inclined than the incumbent Blair team to work with the French on their ESDP agenda. If this assessment is correct, the French EU Presidency during the second half of 2008 would offer Paris the opportunity to demonstrate pragmatic leadership by correcting course in this area.

NATO-ISAF

France was an early and important contributor to the U.S.-led “coalition of the willing” in *Operation Enduring Freedom*, which began in October 2001, but NATO’s involvement in Afghanistan has posed difficult issues for the French. Paris was reluctant to commit NATO to a significant operation outside Europe, reportedly blocking a proposal in NAC in late 2001 to direct NATO military authorities to develop planning options for support of humanitarian relief operations in Afghanistan. France was among the first contributors to ISAF, which was formed in December 2001 under a UN Security Council mandate and commanded under an *ad hoc* rotation of participating nations. But Paris initially resisted the German-led effort to transfer ISAF command and control to NATO in mid-2003. (According to European sources, Chirac acquiesced in the move largely as a gesture of solidarity with then German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, whose government championed the transfer.) French officials later raised concerns with the proposed phased expansion of NATO-ISAF’s mandate, which was originally limited to

Kabul and its nearby environs, to regions outside the capital. They also publicly opposed merging *Enduring Freedom* with NATO-ISAF, arguing that it would change the latter's mission from peacekeeping to counterterrorism. In 2005, France joined the Alliance consensus to expand the mandate to the cover all of Afghanistan, but opted largely to restrict French ground operations under NATO-ISAF command to Kabul and its nearby approaches.

Over the past year, as NATO-ISAF forces have moved into southern and eastern Afghanistan and clashed with resurgent Taliban and other opponents of the central government, the French response has been mixed. France has not sent ground combat elements from its Kabul-based contingent to reinforce U.S., British, Canadian, and Dutch forces that have borne the brunt of the fighting. (In early 2007, Paris withdrew its detachment of some 200-250 special forces who had served with distinction under U.S. operational control in *Enduring Freedom* since mid-2003. Some 950 French military personnel, mostly in land- and sea-based air support roles, still participate in *Enduring Freedom*.) Following discussion at the Riga Summit of operational "caveats" (i.e., national restrictions on how and where Allied units can be deployed by the NATO-ISAF commander), French officials stated that in an emergency situation and on a case-by-case basis, their forces could be dispatched to assist Allies in the south. Since then, the French have improved their force posture in the region—for example, by deploying additional land- and sea-based air strike, air refueling, and air reconnaissance assets and by reinforcing their Kabul-based battalion. They also have conducted air strikes to support Allied forces in the south, executed ground operations with Afghan soldiers to block insurgent approaches into the capital, and increased training assistance to the Afghan National Army.

Depending on the evolution of the military situation in Afghanistan, particularly in the southern region where fighting has been the most intense over the past year, the new president might face difficult decisions regarding the nature of French military participation in NATO-ISAF.

Were an "emergency" situation to occur in Afghanistan in the early days of the new president's term, he or she would be faced with the question of whether and, if so, how to implement the Chirac government's commitment at Riga. If the government's response appeared slow or ineffectual, its credibility with European and North American Allies might be seriously hurt. Its standing with French military leaders also might be put in question, given their repeated statements that Afghanistan constitutes a crucial test for NATO's future. The new president likely would look first at the option of authorizing a temporary redeployment of some of the French ground forces already in the Kabul region to the affected province(s); this could be done in conjunction with increased support from French air assets based in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan and aboard their aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean. Still, the new government would be obliged to examine carefully the size and likely duration of any such move given its military commitments elsewhere. (Worries about operational "overstretch" surfaced in French defense circles last fall, when Chirac decided to commit 2,000 troops to reinforce UN peacekeepers in southern Lebanon. Meanwhile, some 3,500 troops remain in Ivory Coast, despite signs of progress toward a political solution there.)

Another set of presidential decisions likely will be required later this year, when NATO will seek to finalize planning for NATO-ISAF deployments in 2008-09. Specifically, if one or

more of the non-U.S. Allies heavily engaged in the south since 2006—in terms of troop numbers, these are the United Kingdom, Canada, and the Netherlands—were to scale back or end their commitment there, or if an overall increase in force levels were deemed necessary by the NATO-ISAF commander, would the French be prepared to contribute? If so, with what forces—a redeployment from the Kabul region or an overall increase in its participation in NATO-ISAF? And with what, if any, declared or undeclared caveats? Such decisions, of course, would depend heavily on the prevailing French political-military assessment regarding Afghanistan and the status of French military commitments elsewhere, but additional factors would figure in Paris' thinking:

- Paris is no doubt aware of the increasingly visible concern, especially in the United Kingdom and Canada, over the reluctance of several European Allies to share the risks involved in NATO-ISAF operations in the south today, and potentially elsewhere in Afghanistan in the future. Among the other major troop contributors, the Italian and Spanish governments have made clear their intention to restrict their troops to peacekeeping and reconstruction tasks. And while there are scattered signs of an evolution in German attitudes—in recent weeks, some prominent legislators and experts appear to be opening the door toward participation in combat operations—a significant German ground commitment in the south as early as next year might risk a major crisis within the coalition government. By stepping forward to assume a major role in the south, presumably alongside the United Kingdom, France would demonstrate both its national commitment to NATO-ISAF's success and the resilience of the “European pillar” within NATO. In this context, and depending on operational requirements at the time, Paris might see advantages to using the NRF for this purpose.
- Given French capabilities to perform the type combat tasks required in Afghanistan, there would not appear to be any capability-based rationale (e.g., inability to conduct nighttime operations) to restrict their employment. In addition, French military leaders clearly understand the fundamental problem of caveats. As then Chief of Defense Staff General Henri Bentegeat stated in a speech to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in May 2006: “Multiple caveats imposed by the nations hobble commanders in the field and increase the risks to (their) forces.” (Bentegeat now chairs the EU Military Committee, where he presumably is sensitive to the fact that precedents on caveats set in NATO operations could be contagious and adversely affect European cooperation with ESDP missions.) Hence, if the political decision were made to commit French ground forces to combat operations under NATO-ISAF, Paris would have a strong incentive to give its military commanders the flexibility necessary to execute their missions.

As has been the case since 2001, France's willingness to commit forces to Afghanistan will remain closely linked to its perception of the U.S. commitment there. When press reports surfaced in late 2005 that the United States was planning a modest reduction of its force levels (from 19,000 to 16,500) in *Enduring Freedom*, French officials reportedly were nervous that Washington intended in effect to use the growing presence of non-U.S. NATO forces to justify those and possibly future reductions. Today, with U.S. forces in Afghanistan totaling approximately 27,000, including some 15,000 that serve under NATO-ISAF command, the American commitment is at an all-time high, which Paris should find reassuring. Moreover,

despite some differences in approach, there no longer appears to be any fundamental U.S.-French dispute over the need to pursue civilian-led reconstruction and government capacity-building efforts in tandem with NATO-ISAF's security role.

France in NATO Structures

France's support for NATO's "military transformation" roughly parallels its national efforts, begun in 1995, to modernize, professionalize, and reconfigure its forces, especially to become more capable for expeditionary operations conducted as part of multilateral coalitions. Having experienced the disparities in European and American capabilities and their interoperability problems during operations in the Persian Gulf, Balkans and Afghanistan from 1991 to the present, French officials apparently have concluded that closer engagement in NATO's military structures is a necessity, not an option. As General André Var, former French Military Representative to NATO has put it: "France understood that a lack of interest on its part [in NATO transformation] would inevitably marginalize the French armed forces, not only within NATO, but also within the framework of the EU operations."

Specifically, the French military's alignment with NATO standards, concepts and doctrines and its selective involvement in NATO planning disciplines improve interoperability not only with U.S. forces, but also with those of other European forces (in particular, the British and German) that the French regard as their "natural" and most capable partners. Moreover, increased engagement offers the French an opportunity to exert greater influence on NATO's work in all those areas. And when paired with active French participation in specific NATO initiatives—for example, the Defense Capabilities Initiative launched in 1999 and the Prague Capabilities Commitments of 2002—their higher profile in NATO's military structures and specialized agencies can translate into greater opportunities for French defense industries in areas such as strategic air- and sea-lift, communications, airborne ground surveillance systems, and theater missile defense.

The evolution of French military presence at various NATO headquarters reflects such considerations. In 1992, that presence amounted to 117 personnel assigned to various liaison missions—i.e., offices representing French interests while remaining outside the integrated structures. Today, the presence has grown to some 290 personnel, including: 90 serving in liaison capacities; 110 within the integrated structures (including the International Military Staff, IMS; Allied Command Operations, ACO; Allied Command Transformation, ACT; Joint Force Commands, JFCs, at Brunssum and Naples; and the Joint Warfare Center in Stavanger); and 90 scattered among various NATO agencies and air defense components. While the overall French military presence remains slightly more than one percent of the NATO total, French officers have occupied some key positions. In recent years, for example, French general officers have held the posts of IMS Assistant Directors for Cooperation and Regional Security and for Logistics, Armaments and Resources; ACT's Deputy Assistant Chief of Staff for Future Capabilities, Research and Technology; and ACO's Assistant Chief of Staff for Exercises. "We send our best officers to NATO," a senior French officer told the author in March 2004.

Since 2002-03, the French also have progressively increased their participation in NATO's force structure. France has contributed to NRF land and air components during its

progression from prototype status in late 2003 to “full operational capability” in late 2006. In early 2007, France became a major contributor to the NRF maritime component, as well. According to press reports, in 2005 France was leery about dispatching elements of the NRF to augment security during the Afghan elections and provide humanitarian assistance to earthquake victims in Pakistan (where a French general commanded the NFR air component.) To demonstrate their ability to contribute to large-scale NATO operations, French land and maritime “High Readiness Forces” headquarters in Lille and Toulon, respectively, the French air defense and air operations deployable headquarters and associated command center in Taverny, and Eurocorps headquarters in Strasbourg have undergone a NATO certification process. Concomitantly, the French military over recent years has stepped up its participation in NATO training activities, to include hosting exercises on French territory.

Such increased participation has not been cost-free. In 2006, France paid nearly eight percent (138 million Euros) of NATO’s civilian and military budgets, making it the fourth largest overall contributor after the United States, Germany, and United Kingdom.

Still, Paris has not dropped all of the longstanding taboos regarding its participation in NATO. France is the only Ally to remain outside NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group (NPG), which covers issues such as the safety, security and survivability of nuclear weapons, communications and information systems, deployment issues and wider questions of common concern such as nuclear arms control and nuclear proliferation. Similarly, it does not participate in the force planning process through which NATO: identifies the military requirements—in terms of national force levels, structures, readiness and capabilities—to meet the level of ambition agreed by the Alliance political leadership; and periodically reviews Allies’ performance in meeting their agreed force goals. In the former case, French officials have argued in essence that participation in the NPG would be interpreted as a NATO *droit de regard* over French nuclear weapons policy, thus compromising the independence of France’s nuclear deterrent force. In the latter case, they have made similar arguments against NATO’s alleged “top down” direction of the conventional military capabilities of its member states, while claiming that the process is ineffective, as well.

If the new government were to adopt a more forthcoming approach toward NATO-EU cooperation and continue or expand its participation in NATO-led operations, notably in Afghanistan, a logical next step would be to reexamine the French role within NATO structures. This likely would not involve near-term dramatic changes. Rather, it would emerge as a series of incremental steps in the post-2008 period when France’s president will be looking to establish good ties with a new U.S. counterpart.

One such step would be to consider expanding French military representation in NATO staffs and headquarters. With Chirac’s decisions in 1995 (to return French representation to the Military Committee) and 2004 (to obtain French flag officer posts at SHAPE and ACT), France, in a sense, already has crossed the Rubicon of rejoining the integrated military structures. This leaves to his successor the arguably easier task of recalibrating the level of that presence with a straightforward argument: NATO’s experience in the Balkans and Afghanistan has demonstrated the unpredictability, complexity and longevity of crisis management operations involving the transatlantic community and failed (or failing) states, regional conflicts, and

asymmetric threats (such as international terrorism) that put at risk Alliance interests. There is little reason to believe this pattern will change anytime soon. Having acknowledged that NATO is no longer focused solely on defending its borders in Europe and that French interests dictate significant involvement in its expeditionary operations, it would seem increasingly difficult for French officials to justify the hugely disproportional relationship between their major contributions to those operations and their comparatively small representation in the military planning structures that, directly or indirectly, prepare and oversee them.

While some French officials and experts suggest that their relatively small numbers within integrated structures are adequate to “protect French interests,” this line of argument is not totally convincing. It implies that protecting national interests is more important than promoting the collective interests of the Alliance. It also implies that the German, British and Italian military representations, which range from four to nearly six times the size of the French contingent, are grossly inflated and underutilized. And it sidesteps the fact that under currently projected arrangements (agreed in 2003), France would not be represented at the top command level at either of NATO’s two standing JFCs in Naples and Brunssum. While some French experts have hinted that the JFCs reflect an incomplete reform of NATO’s territorial defense arrangements held over from the Cold War, they have not laid out a clear alternative vision for the command structure. Moreover, a principal function of the JFCs headquarters is to exercise operational command over NATO expeditionary operations. Hence, for example, French commanders and their three NATO-certified High Readiness Force headquarters can lead air, land and maritime components of the NRF, but the overall NRF operational command will fall to one of the JFCs—hence, always a non-French flag officer.

A redistribution of command positions and national quotas within the integrated structures to accommodate a larger French presence would not be a trivial exercise. However, as some 20 percent of quota positions are currently vacant, there would appear to be room for growth in French representation without necessarily displacing other Allied personnel. Further adjustments of the command structure are still a subject of considerable interest within the Alliance, some of which—for example, elevating the NATO Joint Headquarters Lisbon to the same level as Brunssum and Naples—could open new opportunities for the French. On balance, most of the European Allies, especially those who are EU members, would welcome a larger French military presence in NATO, provided it is clearly aimed at increasing the operational effectiveness and capabilities of the Alliance and truly complements and reinforces their efforts within the EU. And Paris and Washington presumably would want to avoid repeating their unfortunate experience of mid-1997, when missteps on both sides of the Atlantic led to a collapse of negotiations on French “reintegration.”

That said, France’s “full reintegration” into NATO structures is unlikely for the foreseeable future. Despite Boutechouk’s acknowledgement that NATO “should be the catalyst to remedy” imbalances among the capabilities of its member states, rejoining the DPC appears to hold little attraction for French policymakers, as it could expose them to domestic criticism for “subordinating” French conventional force planning to NATO’s “direction.” (Ironically, French officials have largely contributed to this inaccurate portrayal of how DPC operates.) Furthermore, some French defense experts apparently view DPC membership as largely irrelevant to their nation’s efforts, through its selective participation in various NATO-related

armaments groups, to promote its defense industrial interests and improve its access to, and interoperability with, U.S. and other Allied defense technologies. And while other experts point to a growing *de facto* convergence between NATO and French views on the deterrent role of nuclear weapons, French officials apparently see no advantage to opening the door to Alliance discussions and questions regarding their nation's nuclear capabilities or doctrine.

Between de Gaulle and Descartes

Truth be told, NATO over the years has served as the backdrop for so many skirmishes (and occasional confrontations) between French and American officials that suggestions of a growing convergence of interests between Paris and Washington are bound to receive a skeptical reception on both sides of the Atlantic. Since at least early 2005, the U.S. administration has made a concerted effort to strengthen its relations with NATO *and* the EU, and bilateral security cooperation between France and the United States (already excellent in areas such as counter-terrorism) generally has improved. But given the stated commitments of Mme. Royal and Mssrs. Sarkozy and Bayrou to re-energize ESDP, at least in part to promote their broader vision of the EU as a global security and political actor (as well as economic powerhouse) distinct from the United States, seeds of potential conflict with some U.S. ambitions for NATO have no doubt been sown.

Once the election is decided, however, the next occupant of the Elysée palace can hardly ignore the logic of improved cooperation between the two “old allies.” The French and American militaries cooperate today, and will cooperate in the future, in diverse missions and theaters within and outside Europe. To do so, they must be able to communicate, exchange information, offer mutual support and, if needed, fight side by side. To maintain interoperability, cooperation is required at various levels, including doctrine, planning, technology, equipment, and training. Interoperability does not imply abandonment of sovereignty; it will always be up to political authorities to decide if military forces will be committed in a specific instance. But interoperability is an essential pre-existing condition to cooperate effectively if a political decision is made to do so. Without minimizing differences between Paris and Washington on the appropriate mix of military and non-military tools, they do seem to be in broad agreement that in nearly all crisis management and peacekeeping missions, our militaries will not be alone in the operational theater. They must work closely with an array of civilian agencies and actors—be they international, governmental, or non-governmental organizations—to prevent conflict or stabilize the situation and begin reconstruction in the post-conflict phase.

The same rationale applies to NATO. France has invested in NATO as its primary path to ensure both transatlantic and intra-European interoperability. Contrary to the fears (or myths) of Gaullist purists, France—like other Allies—does not surrender its sovereignty in NATO, whether it involves decisions on operations or structures. And for France to pursue certain self-imposed restrictions on its participation while simultaneously complaining of “American domination” of NATO apparently strikes many of its European partners as increasingly unhelpful. When British defense strategy recognizes the “pre-eminence of NATO as the alliance upon which Europe and North America depends for collective defense and global crisis management” and declares, as a planning assumption, that “the most complex large scale operations will only be conducted as part of a U.S.-led coalition,” and when German Chancellor

Angela Merkel states that “strengthening Europe's security identity, separate from the Atlantic security partnership, is not a route I want to take...For me NATO will continue to be the strongest expression of a security policy for which we are jointly responsible,” will the next French president fail to take notice?

As Americans are learning that ESDP is not “just about France,” the next French government perhaps will listen more to its European partners for whom NATO is not “just about the United States.” Much more than this will be necessary to resolve the figurative contest between Gaullist pride and Cartesian logic, but it would be a start.

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