France and NATO under Sarkozy: End of the French Exception?

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The issue of France’s status in the Atlantic Alliance, a legacy of the decision made by General de Gaulle in 1966 to withdraw France from the integrated military structure of NATO, is being raised once again. In his very first major foreign policy speech, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, broaching a subject which in his view had “long been taboo,” called for “the renovation of NATO and of its relationship with France” and spoke of “an Atlantic organization in which we would play a full role.” In a few weeks later, the President confirmed in Washington, speaking before the United States Congress, that he wanted France—a founding member of the Alliance—to assume its full role in the effort to renew NATO’s instruments and means of action and that it could, if need be, resume “its full role in NATO.”

This French move in the direction of the Alliance was a surprise. During the presidential campaign, candidate Sarkozy—unlike his predecessor Jacques Chirac in 1995—had not invoked a possible “normalization” of the French position, mentioning at most the necessity for France “to adapt its discourse”. In fact, the NATO issue did not seem to be a priority for the future occupant of the Élysée, regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections. The failure, in 1997, of the preceding attempt in this regard—the one led by Jacques Chirac—was still fresh in people’s memories; the consensus being that little was to be gained, in terms of domestic policy, by reopening the debate. More importantly, France’s participation in NATO—one that had grown discreetly stronger for the last few years against a backdrop of strategic sea change and of a profound transformation of the Alliance—seemed to have attained an equilibrium, and even to have become an issue of secondary importance on both sides.

Yet the President’s initiative has brought the France-NATO issue back to centre stage, at least for a while. To be sure, nothing is settled yet. The “White Paper on Defence and National Security,” the content of which should be released this spring, may provide initial hints, but it is safe to say that no final decision will be made on the France-NATO issue for several months, if not before 2009. One may nonetheless already ask a few key questions: is this initiative a reflection, in this area as well, of the “rupture” called for by candidate Sarkozy, or is there a continuity in terms of objectives, if not of method or of “style”? Does the attempt currently being made have any chance of meeting these same objectives, or can it fail, as did the previous one? Lastly, and based upon various conceivable scenarios, what are the possible consequences of the attempt? Could it actually lead to the end of the long-standing French “exception” in the Atlantic Alliance?

RUPTURE OR CONTINUITY?

Nicolas Sarkozy’s initiative concerning the Alliance inevitably raises a preliminary question: are we already seeing, as his term of office begins,

French policy veer towards “Atlanticism”—a shift of which this initiative might be a signal? (By “Atlanticism,” we mean a systematic priority given to seeking an entente with the United States beyond the strict requirements of the Alliance, even at the risk of alignment with the U.S.) Placed end-to-end, could the statements and decisions of the new president with respect to several major international issues (hard-lining on the Iranian nuclear question, reinforcement—though admittedly moderate so far—of the French military presence in Afghanistan, the visit to Iraq by French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bernard Kouchner), combined with a very clear warming of bilateral relations (President Sarkozy’s visit last August to Kennebunkport, his official visit to Washington last November) be signalling (to use the categories once set out by former Minister of Foreign Affairs Hubert Védrine) a rupture with the “Gaullo-Mitterrandian-Chiracian consensus” in foreign policy? In other words, is there a repudiation of the motto “Friends, allies, but not aligned,” which has dominated French relations with the United States since the 1960s?²

Nothing so far categorically confirms this hypothesis, at least if one leaves aside the question of “style”. Although Sarkozy does not conceal the fact that he is personally inclined to re-establish very close relations with the United States, and that he intends to definitively close the book on the 2003 dispute over Iraq, the current phase of Franco-American rapprochement—which, incidentally, was initiated by Jacques Chirac in early 2004—basically follows a well-known pattern. All of the first years of all presidential terms under the Fifth Republic have been characterized by such a tendency, regardless of the contexts or personalities involved. What is more, the President, in the past few months, has been constantly stressing the point that a Franco-American relationship that is close or simply “normal” for two long-time allies does not exclude the possibility of disputes, and further stated before the United States Congress: “I want to be your friend, your ally and your partner. But a friend who stands on his own two feet. An independent ally. A free partner.”³ In any event, in the post-Cold War and post-11 September world—as the Iraqi crisis has clearly shown—it is not so much institutions as situations that determine the nature of relations between allies. In the final analysis, then, the true test of “Atlanticism,” for which some people criticize Sarkozy, will have to wait until the next major international crisis, perhaps over Iran (for now, the hard-line approach to sanctions can be interpreted as a desire to promote the use of persuasion, rather than force, in handling the Iran nuclear issue). Until then, we need to take at face value what the new President allegedly asserted to Védrine: “I am not the Atlanticist that people think I am”⁴.

Let us now return to the more specific issue at stake: that of France’s status within the Atlantic Alliance. For Sarkozy’s initiative to be interpreted as a genuine rupture with previous French policy—and therefore as the expression of a genuinely “Atlanticist” choice—the determination to achieve “normalization” which he has demonstrated ought to constitute an end in itself, the ultimate objective being to re-establish, at any cost, the full participation of France in NATO. Yet a link was immediately suggested between the “strengthening of European defence”, the “renovation of NATO”, and the renewal “of its relations with France,” the French President having stipulated as early as last summer that these “moves” were, in his opinion, “complementary.”⁵ To be sure, the president’s statements were initially interpreted by some as auguring a pure and simple return of France to the NATO structure, and the highlighting of the other two projects (European defence and the renovation of NATO) were seen, in that spirit, as primarily aimed at legitimizing the move. But since then the language has been refined, and a more explicit linkage established between these three issues. Initially presented as having to be carried out pari passu with the evolution of France’s status within the Alliance, the strengthening of

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5. See H. Védrine, Continuer l’histoire, Paris, Fayard, 2007, and Les Mondes de François Mitterrand. À l’Élysée, 1981-1995, Paris, Fayard, 1996. The motto “Friends, allies but not aligned” is historically accurate. Proof of this can readily be recalled: the decision made by General de Gaulle in 1966 did not consist of withdrawing France from the North Atlantic Treaty organization (of which it is still a member, though subject to specific terms and conditions) and even less from the Atlantic Alliance (of which the General and his successors never disputed the necessity), but solely from the integrated structure, which was considered then to be militarily incompatible with the status of French independent nuclear power and politically synonymous with subordination to American policy. See F. Bozo, La France et l’OTAN. De la guerre froide au nouvel ordre européen, Paris, Masson, 1991, and Two Strategies for Europe: de Gaulle, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

6. On this point, see F. Bozo and G. Parmentier, op. cit.

7. Speech before the United States Congress (containing the implicit confirmation of the Vedrine motto); see note 2.

8. Interview granted by Hubert Védrine to Libération, 19 May 2007. See also note 30, below.

9. Speech before the Ambassadors’ Conference, see note 1.
European defence and the renovation of NATO are now referred to as preliminary stages. The president thus stressed before the U.S. Congress that “the more successful we are in establishing a European defence, the more France will be resolved to resume its full role in NATO”. \(^{10}\) The timetable was in fact arranged with that goal in mind. Although a swift resolution of the France-NATO issue seemed likely at first, the sequence now being contemplated, as we have seen, is a more protracted one. The possible “normalization” of the French position in the Alliance should therefore not intervene, assuming it does, prior to the Sixtieth Anniversary Summit of the Atlantic Alliance scheduled for the month of April 2009—i.e. after the French Presidency of the European Union in the second semester 2008, during which Paris hopes to convince the Twenty-Seven to promote the progress of a European defence policy as advocated by President Sarkozy in the wake of the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty. \(^{11}\)

The present initiative is therefore in line—at least in terms of general objectives—with preceding policies. For nearly a quarter of a century, against the backdrop of a persistent East-West status quo, the Gaullist model of membership in the Alliance (“non-integration,” selective presence in decision-making bodies) had by and large worked to France’s advantage. However, with the end of the Cold War and the subsequent transformation of the strategic context, the status quo between France and NATO became difficult to sustain. Three crucial issues arose, which immediately posed dilemmas for France’s Atlantic policy: how could one reconcile the special status of France and its actual implication in the Alliance’s growing activities, including military operations? How, despite the country’s relative isolation within the Alliance due to its special status, could Paris influence the long-term changes in the Atlantic institution that were inevitable after the end of the block system? And how could France at the same time pursue its European ambitions in matters of security and defence, ambitions that were all the more necessary and justified once the page had been turned on the Cold War? \(^{12}\)

It is this equation that each of Sarkozy’s two predecessors have sought to resolve through a grand bargaining designed to get France out of this triple deadlock by tackling at the same time the France-NATO “normalization” issue (with France potentially reassuming its full role in the structure), the in-depth rethinking of the Alliance in view of the new strategic context, and, naturally, the pursuit of the traditional European politico-strategic objectives. François Mitterrand attempted to do just that in 1990–1991, against the backdrop of a broad debate on post-Cold War European architecture (that effort, which was highly confidential at the time, is still largely unknown). Then Jacques Chirac tried to do the same in 1995–1997, in a context marked by the Balkan conflicts (this time, the initiative was carried out in the open). Both failed and returned to pursuing a more “incremental” French policy of rapprochement with the Alliance. \(^{13}\)

The new president is thus merely reworking the problem. Of course, circumstances have changed a lot, both as a result of the strategic upheavals that have occurred over the last decade—particularly due to the impact of the Kosovo crisis in 1999 and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, followed by the Iraqi crisis of 2003—and of the structural transformation of transatlantic relations which has resulted from these upheavals. In recent years, the very essence of the Alliance underwent a change in terms of both its military role (in which the notion of “coalition of the willing” with varying degrees of participation is becoming increasingly prevalent, replacing the more rigid integration models inherited from the Cold War), and of its political role (admission of ten new members, broaden-scope missions, globalization of partnerships, etc.). \(^{14}\) At the same time, and influenced by the same factors, the nature of the European issue changed with the launch in 1999 of a European

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11. Jean-Claude Mallet, Chairman of the Defence White Paper Committee, has stressed that “[his] priority [within the framework of the Committee] is to determine how the relaunch of a European defence can be accomplished, and then to envisage a more relaxed relationship with NATO, which may eventually lead to a rapprochement.” See “Les grands travaux de la défense française” in Le Monde, 28-29 October 2007.

12. On the limitations of the Gaullist “model” at the end of the Cold War, see F. Bozo, La France et l’OTAN, op. cit.


Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), laying the groundwork for genuine autonomy in politico-military decision-making within the Union’s framework. 15 Lastly, far from remaining frozen after the 1997 failure, relations between France and NATO continued to change gradually—though not always openly. This (particularly since the 2002–2004 period) has led to an unprecedented French participation in the Atlantic military “machinery”: a close involvement in the operations (notably in the Kosovo Force [KFOR] in Kosovo and in the International Security Assistance Force [ISAF] in Afghanistan), strong participation in the NATO Response Force (NRF), the “insertion” as of 2004 of some one hundred French officers in integrated commands (Mons and Norfolk) for the first time since 1966, etc. 16

The factors of the equation are therefore no longer the same as they were twelve years ago at the time of Chirac’s attempt. And yet, France’s role in the Alliance is still unsatisfactory in many respects. To be sure, France’s “special status” has lost quite a bit of its practical significance in recent years due to the pragmatic pursuit of a France-NATO rapprochement. However, the strong French involvement in military forces and operations is offset by a still-minimal presence in NATO’s permanent integrated structures, which, despite the previously mentioned assertion of an ad hoc coalition military logic, have remained (starting with the command and planning bodies inherited from the Cold War) quite oversized. As a result, the involvement of France at military decision-making levels is still proportionally much less than its operational participation, which ipso facto curtails what credit and prestige it may anticipate from such involvement, as well as its capacity to influence the planning and conduct of military interventions that are decisive for NATO’s future, as in Afghanistan. 17

This is compounded by a still limited French influence on the overall development of the Atlantic institution. Following the failure of Chirac’s attempt in 1997, French pragmatism in military matters was indeed accompanied by a clearly less accommodating attitude from a political viewpoint, inasmuch as Paris was determined to use an often finicky approach in defending its positions within the Alliance. This attitude was reasserted and even toughened in the wake of the 2003 Iraqi crisis. Since then, Paris has often displayed a restrictive—and at times even obstructive—attitude in dealing with certain key issues, such as the “globalization” of NATO, or EU-NATO relations. This hard-line approach, although softened in the last two or three years, has led to a certain degree of French self-marginalization in the Atlantic debate, at a key juncture for the future of the Alliance and of transatlantic relations.

Lastly, France’s ambitions in matters of European defence continue, despite significant progress observed since the launch of ESDP, to be curtailed by the maintenance of its “special status” and by the way it intransigently asserts its positions within the Alliance. Because a number of France’s European partners—starting with the Union’s new members, for whom Atlanticism remains an absolute priority— are still suspicious about any progress in matters of European defence that might be interpreted as contrary to the interest of the Atlantic Alliance, they continue to view France’s policy and special status in relation to the latter as the sign of a desire to build a European defence against the Alliance, or as a substitute for the latter (here too, of course, the fallout from the 2003 crisis is still being felt). As a result, France has lost some of its capacity to gain support from other countries on this key issue, for its ability to provide ESDP leadership remains limited as a result of its perceived ambiguous attitude toward the transatlantic link.

It is this three-fold problem that the Sarkozy initiative aims to resolve in the footsteps of those which preceded it. The “renovation” of the French position is indeed primarily aimed at allowing the country to exert an influence on the Alliance activities commensurate with its actual contribution at a time when NATO is engaged in operations that represent a litmus test for its future. Next, it aims at placing France in a position to fully assert itself in the debate on how the Alliance should evolve, at a time when the latter confronts the need to redefine its mission (a new strategic concept), its framework (partnerships, enlargement) and perhaps the way in which

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17. Hence the hundred or so members of the French military personnel “integrated” into the structure since 2004 represent less than 1% of the latter’s total members (see below, note 21).
it functions (decision-making process, the role of Europeans). Lastly, this renovation aims at facilitating the relaunch of a European defence policy which constitutes a priority goal with the approaching French presidency of the EU in the second half of 2008. The stakes involved are therefore quite high.

**WILL THE THIRD ATTEMPT WORK?**

The timing may seem propitious. As in the past, the initiative was launched early in the presidential term—a period conducive to aggiornamenti. In fact, every French president since de Gaulle has sought, in the early years of their tenure, to redefine (more or less spectacularly) the country’s Atlantic policy. Furthermore, it is taking place in the context of a re-examination, desired by the new president, of all aspects of French defence and security policy, as illustrated by the drafting of the white papers on defence and foreign policy, the launching of a General Review of Public Policies (RGPP), and the preparation of a new military programme law. Lastly, it is occurring in the context of a Franco-American—and more generally Euro-American—rapprochement, with a line being drawn under the 2003 Iraqi crisis. As far as the U.S. is concerned, Sarkozy can bank on what a coup it would be for George W. Bush to finish his presidency with the enviable achievement—after the calamitous transatlantic crisis of 2003—of France’s return to NATO, which might induce Washington to be more receptive to the concessions requested by Paris. As for Europe, he can bank on the recent changes in the leadership of the major countries (Angela Merkel in Germany and Gordon Brown in the United Kingdom) to obtain its partners’ support in an ambitious renegotiation of the Euro-Atlantic deal.

In view of this, can the initiative meet its stated objectives? Would a “normalization” of France’s position in the Alliance bring a solution to the aforementioned dilemmas? To that, we can only give a mixed response. We need to distinguish between various issues. The first concerns the possibility of reaching an agreement on the terms of France’s return into NATO’s structure in the event of “normalization”—an agreement that would allow the country to take on responsibilities commensurate with its actual involvement in the Alliance. This is critical because the previous attempt to resolve this issue had proven to be a stumbling block, and it ultimately failed in 1997 due to the Franco-American dispute over NATO’s southern command in Naples, which Paris was claiming should be handled by the major European countries on a rotating basis. President Sarkozy rightly pointed out that “France can only resume its place” in NATO “if room is made. It’s hard to take a place that isn’t reserved for you.”

The outlook appears more favourable in this regard than it did ten or twelve years ago, mainly due to the rapprochement initiated since then with NATO’s structure. With respect to the principal politico-military (i.e., not integrated) bodies, France is now absent only from the Defence Planning Committee (DPC) and from the Nuclear Planning Group (NPG). It is thus really up to France to decide what role it would like to have in them without its choice being likely to cause particular problems in its relations with the allies. In terms of the integrated structure per se, a complete “return” would be facilitated by the fact that France (as we have seen) already took a decisive step in 2004 by seconding close to one hundred military personnel in the major headquarters. It would therefore really be a matter of raising, rather than restoring, the French presence in these structures. True, the issue could prove delicate with respect to the key command positions that might be attributed to France—which implies that some positions would have to be vacated by their current occupants—but it is likely that an agreement could be worked out if such were the price that needs to be paid to allow France to fully rejoin NATO. As a result of the lesser politico-strategic importance assigned by the United States to NATO integration, the stakes associated with assigning commands are not as critical as they were at the time of the dispute over Naples (which, it should be emphasized, had constituted a very poor “target,” in view of how valuable it was to Washington at the time). Such an agreement could, for example, concern the position of Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe (DSACEUR, currently held by a British general) which could be “rotated” among the

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19. In December 1995, Paris announced that France planned to participate again in the meetings of the Ministers of Defence and of the Military Committee, but not in the DPC (associated at the time with the old integration of the Cold War era), nor in the NPG (identified with American nuclear strategy, from which France had always distanced itself). For a discussion of a French return to the DPC and/or the NPG, see below in fine.
major European allies without Washington being likely to object to that.20

Yet although it is relatively easy to imagine how France might succeed this time in resuming its “full role” in NATO, it is less certain that such a move would give it ipso facto the additional influence it is seeking within the Alliance. France certainly might—after building up its presence in the military structure over the course of a few years—find itself on seemingly equal footing with Germany or the United Kingdom. But after forty years of absence, such equality could turn out to be more of a formality than a reality, especially in comparison with the United Kingdom, whose mastery of the NATO machinery has been unequaled from the start, let alone the United States, which continues to dominate a structure that has scarcely budged since the Cold War—once again, despite the shift of the operational logic towards modularity and “coalitions of the willing.”21

Only an in-depth overhaul of the military structure would make it possible to truly turn things around. The issue therefore is the following: could France, thanks to its “normalization,” hope to contribute to such a transformation of the structure, which should result in a reduction of an oversized military apparatus—whose monolithic functioning continues to reflect decades-old conceptions—and in the implementation of a much more flexible and modular structure that would correspond to new strategic realities? Aside from how difficult it would be for France to reassume its full role in a structure that it wishes to see radically change, one cannot overlook the obstacles. True, factors exist that will favour such a change. Certain allies, starting with the United Kingdom, acknowledge the inadequacy of the integrated military bodies and would be prepared to envisage a large-scale reorganization initiative. For its part, the United States no longer assigns the same importance to France’s influence in this debate—to the contrary perhaps, since the French “return” to NATO might be interpreted (however incorrectly) as a desire for not only institutional, but also political normalization. In issues such as

in Europe, and it would probably be inclined to favour a reorganization—provided, of course, that it be compatible with maintaining the effectiveness of the U.S. chain of command, which in effect still duplicates the NATO chain of command and thereby controls it. We should also take into account the inertia of the structures, the weight of habits and the ability of bureaucracies to persist. Therefore it is uncertain whether France will readily obtain quick satisfaction in this matter.

What of the French capacity for influencing the overall evolution of the Alliance in the event of a “normalization”? This poses a more fundamental problem. For although the military structure has become a stake of relatively secondary importance for the United States—which may indeed facilitate Paris plans—this is not the case of other aspects. The question of the respective importance of the Alliance’s military and political roles has always been the core focus of disputes between Paris and Washington, with France seeking (since the 1967 Harmel Report) to prevent an overly extensive “ politicization” of the Alliance, in which France has always perceived the risk of seeing NATO become the cornerstone of an international order controlled by the United States. This issue is all the more relevant today. Since the end of the Cold War, and especially since the terrorist attacks of 2001, the Alliance has in fact become for Washington much more of a framework for legitimizing its political aims than a military tool, as witnessed at the time of the post-11 September operation in Afghanistan, and in connection with the war in Iraq. However, this powerful trend contrasts with French views: hence candidate Sarkozy pointed out the risk of seeing the Alliance mutate into “… a global organization carrying out missions in the area between military, humanitarian and international police activities.” Above all, he stressed that its vocation is not to “… become a rival to the UN.”22

Nothing can ensure that the “renovation” of the French position would ipso facto strengthen France’s influence in this debate—to the contrary perhaps, since the French “return” to NATO might be interpreted (however incorrectly) as a desire for not only institutional, but also political normalization. In issues such as

21. The total personnel of the NATO military structure (commands and other) still consists of about 15,000 persons, of whom 9,000 work solely for ACO (Allied Command Operations, namely SHAPE and its subordinate commands). The restructuring now underway should result in reducing this figure to about 13,000 (compared to the one hundred or so personnel employed in the EU’s military structure).
the formulation of a new strategic concept of the Alliance (precisely one which Paris wants to see establish a balance between military missions and a political role), its “globalization” (in which France wants to avoid too strong an institutionalization of partnerships with non-European countries and a fortiori any likelihood of their accession to the Alliance), or its enlargement (Paris still has reservations about a rushed accession of such countries as Ukraine or Georgia)—issues which, to a large extent, will shape the future of the Alliance and its possible status as a Western and democratic rival of the UN and the “legitimizing” body of first resort which some in Washington desire it to be—a French “normalization” would probably have no particular effect upon France’s ability to promote its ideas, at least in the short run.  

Can the movement of France towards NATO be of a nature to promote another change which Paris has been advocating for a long time, namely the capacity of Europeans to exert a collective influence within the Alliance? This question has been the focus of Franco-American debates since the 1960s—if not since the Alliance was first formed—France having long argued in favour of transforming a fundamentally unsymmetrical Alliance built around the American “hegemony” into a balanced institution organized around two pillars: one American and the other European. The trends at work since the end of the Cold War and the events of 11 September (relative American withdrawal from Europe, the EU’s affirmation in the area of security and defence) have merely underscored this necessity. And yet, even if we can expect less concern about Paris’ plans for European defence, it is quite unlikely that the rapprochement between France and NATO, or even the normalization of the French status in the Alliance, would radically change everything—at least not in the short or medium-term. Washington is still resistant to any idea of a European “caucus” or EU representation in the Atlantic Council, which would by its very nature challenge the leadership of the United States within the Alliance (let alone transform the latter into a U.S.-EU alliance, which still qualifies as a long-term vision).

So what would become of European defence itself, which Sarkozy considers the main condition for the normalization of relations between France and NATO? This question lies at the heart of the subject. It is two-fold: first, is the return of France to the NATO structure of a sort that will result in a European defence pillar within NATO (this, it should be pointed out, was the wager inspiring Chirac’s 1995–1997 attempt)? It might appear so: by reassuming its full role in the commands and by obtaining some degree of Europeanization of the latter, France could help to promote a desirable acknowledgement of Europe’s contribution to NATO. Yet, would this bring about the emergence of a genuinely autonomous European pillar, particularly with respect to key planning and command operations? That is improbable in view of the current state of the NATO structure, which, as has been said, remains tightly controlled by the United States. As for the assumption that this same structure could be reorganized in a sufficiently radical way (notably in terms of its modularity) to allow for such an evolution, that too, as seen above, remains uncertain, or is at least unlikely to occur in the near future. Finally, another significant consideration comes into play: the issue is no longer, in 2007, what it was in 1997, because the launch of ESDP in 1999 has laid the groundwork for a truly autonomous European defence within the EU framework. It is therefore hard to conceive of how the return to the idea that European defence is subject to a European pillar in NATO could be understood in any way other than as a step backwards and as a setback for French ambitions.

Hence the second question: could the French move towards NATO, in the short or middle-term, lead to the emergence of a stronger European defence within the EU framework? That, too, is uncertain. The United States could undoubtedly be receptive to the French desire to bolster ESDP, but what would be the practical and immediate effect of that? Given that Washington has never openly expressed any objection, in principle, to the latter, a change in American discourse would only have a limited impact, and even more so considering that the United States is not, by definition, a direct stakeholder in this project—and that it could nevertheless continue to indirectly exert a negative influence through its closest allies. However, nothing indicates that the French NATO “renovation” would inspire in those allies a substantial change in attitude: Great Britain—obviously the central actor in

23. A democratic administration, ostensibly more attached to NATO’s brand of multilateralism, could turn out to be, in such matters, an even more difficult partner. See I. Daalder and J. Goldgeier, “Global NATO,” Foreign Affairs, September-October 2006, pp. 105–113.
this matter—persists in considering an ESDP strengthened beyond a certain (quite modest) degree of ambition with distrust, and as being contradictory to the maintenance of the transatlantic link. It is therefore quite unlikely that Paris will fully obtain satisfaction on this matter during its Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2008, notably concerning the strengthening of the EU’s operational planning and command capacities, without which European defence risks remaining a pious vow for a long time (London is already hiding behind the Lisbon Treaty ratification and the next general elections in Great Britain, putting off any serious discussion on the ESDP to 2010, at the earliest).

WHAT ARE THE MOST LIKELY SCENARIOS?

All in all, we should thus be well aware of the limits of what might be realistically obtained—at least in the short-to-medium term—in exchange for a “normalization” of the French position in the Alliance. What conceivable changes, then, can be expected in the coming months? Evidently, it is too soon to say with any certainty. The initiative launched last summer is unlikely to bear any fruit before next year. The publication of the French White Paper on Defence (and to a lesser extent, the one on foreign policy) in the spring of 2008, and the drafting of the military programme law, should provide initial hints about the stand on NATO and other major correlated matters (threat assessment, general defence policy, size of the forces, budget, etc.). The Atlantic Alliance Summit in Bucharest in April 2008—although it is certain to be dominated by subjects such as the situation in Afghanistan, NATO enlargement, or even the global partnerships issue—may give an initial indication of the allies’ inclination to engage in the “renovation” of the Alliance desired by Paris. But it is obviously the French Presidency of the European Union in the second half of 2008 that should constitute the most important deadline, in view of Sarkozy’s focus on ESDP, which is expected to be high on the agenda. To the extent that progress made towards a European defence constitutes the main condition set out for any possible “normalization” of the French position in the Alliance, logically it will only be in 2009 that definitive decisions can be made in this regard. The Sixtieth Anniversary Summit of the Alliance, which is scheduled to be held in spring 2009—with a new administration in place in Washington—may offer the allies an opportunity to somewhat formally acknowledge these decisions.

It is, however, already possible, in light of the aforementioned analysis, to outline two possible scenarios.

The first—undoubtedly the least probable under the present circumstances—would involve a suspension of the manoeuvre initiated last summer. Such a scenario would stem from the inadequacy of the concessions obtained by France in exchange for its new positions regarding the Alliance. Despite a possible compromise—which is more likely than in preceding attempts—on the position France would occupy within the NATO structure in the event of “normalization,” Paris would point to the insufficient progress made towards both the “renovation” of NATO and the strengthening of European defence. Should the conditions set out in these two areas not be met, France, as in 1991 and in 1997, would thereby acknowledge its inability to obtain a renovation of the Alliance and, more generally, to substantially transform Euro-Atlantic relations, at least for the time being.

Such a scenario would also ensue from a realization of the risks involved with a “renovation” of the relations between France and NATO being carried out without any accompanying transformation of the Alliance itself, or more importantly, of any real progress with regard to ESDP. First, diplomatic risks: choosing a “return to NATO” without tangible concessions in these two areas could lead to a different interpretation of Sarkozy’s international action than the one suggested above—an action which then could hardly escape being labelled as “Atlanticist.” France’s return to the NATO fold could indeed be perceived by the rest of the world as a turning point in French policy in the direction of an alignment with the United States, shedding the image of an independent France with an “alternative” vision, thereby diminishing its political credibility in a number of situations and regions. It could also weaken the French position within the Alliance itself, given that France’s unique position often serves as a screen behind which numerous allies hide in order to resist certain Washington-led views. Lastly, it could be interpreted by the United States itself as an indication of a renunciation of past policies, or even as an abandonment

of forty years of “independence,” posing at the same time the risk, common early on during all French presidential terms, of Washington overstating the extent of the Franco-American rapprochement—an overstatement that, in the past, has very often paved the way for the next Franco-American crisis.25

Next, there are domestic policy risks. A “return” to NATO that would be accompanied neither by a substantial transformation of the Atlantic Alliance, nor by any real progress of the European Union in terms of defence and security, might induce at least a portion of the political class to speak out against challenging the traditional French posture. Although the debate has so far remained under wraps and muffled, certain policy statements coming from the Left—beginning with those of Védrine in his report on France and globalization commissioned by President Sarkozy26—are already oriented in this direction. Unsurprisingly, the Right is more discreet, but some voices are also starting to be heard from that side.27 It is therefore possible—should the French move towards NATO persist without convincing concessions—that this formerly consensual issue may once again become a point of contention in the political debate. Public opinion may also become a significant factor. It is worth noting that French opinion is, paradoxically, relatively favourable to NATO, at least when compared to that of countries reputed to be more “Atlanticist,” and that the eroding support for the Alliance over the last few years has been less pronounced in France than in these same countries.28 Yet one may think that this phenomenon is precisely due to France’s unique historic position in the Alliance—as well as to the rather low priority given to the issue—and that the fact that it is being challenged could change the situation, especially if France’s NATO normalization were to take place in the absence of any real concessions. In any case, the various stances taken by experts have so far been rather critical.29

Under these circumstances, is an interruption of the “normalization” process desired by the President conceivable? No doubt it is, on paper. Were the concessions received deemed inadequate, it would be possible to justify such a decision more effectively than in 1997. At that time, the negotiation’s failure hinged almost entirely on the issue of what position France should be assigned in the NATO structures, with the foremost issue being that of the southern command. This gave credit to the idea—which France’s partners, notably the Americans, had not hesitated to spread around—according to which the manoeuvre’s failure should be blamed on immoderate French demands. This time Paris could emphasize, not narrow prestige-inspired considerations, but substantial arguments pertaining to the French conception of the necessary transformation of Euro-Atlantic relations as a whole. Terminating the manoeuvre would also be more “painless” than in 1997 given that the relations between France and NATO have steadily expanded since then—including (since 2004) a move towards the integrated structure—a rapprochement which might be pursued despite a hypothetical failure of the Sarkozy approach. Lastly, while French diplomacy found itself, after 1997, isolated and without any real alternative option in the Euro-Atlantic debate—at least until Saint-Malo and the relaunch of European defence in 1998–1999—the EU has since then become an authentic long-term option in matters of security and defence. The failure or interruption of the current move toward the Alliance would ipso facto validate the priority that France is giving to the emergence of a credible European defence within the EU framework. The latter would in fact appear to be the only option capable of ultimately leading to a change in NATO’s current structure.

This first scenario, however, is certainly not, to date, the most likely one. President Sarkozy could indeed—in Atlantic just as in European matters—aim to achieve success where his predecessor had


28. Thus, in 2006, the percentage of individuals who considered NATO “indispensable” was 59% in France, as compared to 62% in the United Kingdom, and only 56% in Germany, 52% in Italy, 48% in Poland and 44% in Turkey: see German Marshall Fund, Transatlantic Trends 2006, http://www.transatlantic trends.org/trends/index_archive.cfm?id=42.

failed before him. Combined with the revival of European political construction, of which the Union’s French Presidency in the second half of 2008 would aim to mark a high point, a successful “renovation” of the relations between France and NATO—even if only on the basis, as we shall see, of a limited “reintegration” that could be decided upon in the spring of 2009 (perhaps on the occasion of the Sixtieth Anniversary Summit of the Alliance in April 2009)—would thus confirm, in a key foreign policy and security project, Sarkozy’s announced rupture—not so much in the very orientations of this policy as in its effectiveness and its capacity to yield results (again, a real “Atlanticist” rupture does not appear to be on the agenda).  

Achieving a successful “normalization” between France and NATO (it is the second scenario envisaged in these pages, which is arguably more probable than the first) would likely be justified by the President by the necessity, in this area as in others, for an aggiornamento too long deferred. This would involve, in deciding an issue that has been debated for some twenty years, definitively resolving a dilemma whose practical ramifications have essentially become secondary, and its whys and wherefores somewhat Byzantine. In essence, the President could argue that, inasmuch as the relations between France and NATO have already, over the last few years, been extensively, though discreetly, “normalized,” the moment has come to acknowledge this situation and, as it were, “formalize” it. His aim would thus be to reconcile, in this area as well, French “discourse” with realities by seizing an opportune moment early in his first term. Thanks to an equally favourable international context (a new American president, post-Iraq transatlantic reconciliation, new leaders in major European countries), the objective would be to clarify a French relationship with the Alliance that has become difficult to understand with the passing decades and which, as we have seen, complicates France’s European and Atlantic policies. It would also involve recognizing the difficulty of explaining the special position of France—or of what actually remains of it—in terms inherited from a decision made by General de Gaulle when the Cold War was at its height, the notions of “independence,” “autonomy of decision,” and “non-integration,” no longer being relevant within an alliance that is virtually no longer a military “block”.

If, at the end of the current initiative, the choice of an actual “normalization” of the status of France within NATO were to be retained, it should naturally be accompanied by assurance that such an aggiornamento would not challenge the French objectives, and perhaps that it would even promote them—the in-depth transformation of the Atlantic Alliance and assertion of the European Union in matters of defence and security. Such assurance could be obtained provided that a postulate or an initial admission is made: dissociation must prevail from that point on between these objectives, which naturally remain high priority, but also have a long-term orientation, and the concrete terms of French participation within NATO.

As for the Alliance’s transformation, it should be stressed that, in the future, it will depend less upon the specific status of France—or upon any other institutional data—than on structural factors, beginning with the evolution of the American vision of NATO, or with the politico-strategic assertion of the European Union. It is both of these factors that ultimately make a far-reaching restructuring of the Alliance inevitable. True, this would amount to an acknowledgement that a genuine Atlantic aggiornamento is still far off, inasmuch as the United States is in no way prepared to give up its control of the Alliance or stop imposing its choices on the latter, and Europe is not able to balance them. But at any rate, is maintaining the current French position likely to hasten this moment? A “normalization” might, on the other hand, help do so: first, by decreasing the suspicions and attributions of ulterior motives that French ideas on the future of the Atlantic Alliance still arouse, solely by virtue of France’s “specific” status in NATO; next, by allowing France, when the time comes, to exert an influence on these changes from actually within the institution and more efficiently than from its current insular position. While waiting

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30. An additional sign of this is the so far very prudent nature—despite the desire for a “normalization” of the relationship between France and NATO—of the expansion of the French military engagement in Afghanistan, irrespective of pressures from the United States and other allies who are currently in the front line in the southern and eastern parts of the country. See A. de La Grange, “La France est convaincue que la solution en Afghanistan n’est pas uniquement militaire,” Le Figaro, 24 December 2007.

31. Indeed, caveats (i.e., national restrictions in matters of operational engagements) now take precedence over the formal “integration” situation in terms of the military structure, as exemplified by the restrictive role of Germany in Afghanistan, despite its status as an “integrated” nation par excellence.
for the right circumstances for the Alliance’s inevitable aggiornamento—which, again, will take some time—French “normalization,” far from indicating a resignation or an alignment, might even be presented as the very condition necessary to ensure France’s ability to resist trends that are very likely, in the short to middle-term, as we have noted, to be contrary to its best interests ( politicization, globalization, enlargement, etc. ). Therefore, in reconsidering what has become incidental ( the organizational position of France in NATO ), it would be a matter of more effectively preserving what is essential ( its political “ resistance ” capability within the Alliance ) in view of both the evolution of the Atlantic institution in general, and of future crises ( the 2003 Iraq crisis, it should be recalled, caused all the more finger-pointing at France in the Alliance because of its special position within the institution ).

With respect to the EU’s assertion in matters of defence and security—which clearly continues to be an ambitious goal for France—a definitive “ normalization ” of the French position in the Alliance ought to be justified on the basis of a similar observation: that of the effective dichotomy that now exists between NATO’s future ( and therefore the role of France within the latter ) on the one hand, and the European defence project on the other. As already mentioned, NATO’s future development can no longer—if only by virtue of the existence of an autonomous ESDP within the EU framework—rely on the Europeanization of NATO’s structure, as it did in the 1990s. Such acknowledgement should induce Paris to avoid as much as possible searching for a formal quid pro quo over this issue. Indeed, over the next few months, the more the French will put forward, as a prerequisite for the “ normalization ” of the French position within the Alliance, the need to reach a compromise on the reorganization of NATO’s military structure and on the strengthening of European defence, the more they will risk being dragged into a negotiation predicated on jointly achieving both—a predicament whose ultimate result would precisely be to put European defence back under NATO’s control, and thereby revive the notion of a European pillar within NATO—an idea that has been outmoded since ESDP was launched, and whose return would constitute a step backwards for Paris.

It would therefore be best to settle for a give-and-take situation in principle , that would ultimately lead to France deciding, probably in 2009, to reassure “ its full role ” in NATO conditional upon the political commitment of its Atlantic allies and European partners to accept a serious build-up of ESDP. This commitment would imply their accepting the future progress made by ESDP—a commitment that should have been clearly expressed ahead of time, such as on the occasion of an Alliance summit. It would then be up to French officials to explain that the “ return ” to NATO in no way implies a renunciation of France’s European ambitions. They would need to emphasize that the latter now follow their own logic and are organizationally unlinked to that of NATO, and that these same ambitions would benefit from a more transparent relationship between France and NATO. ( They could also, of course, build upon the results that will be obtained in certain areas pertaining to ESDP during the French EU Presidency in the second semester of 2008—whether involving capacities or the revision of the European security strategy—even if Paris obtains only partial satisfaction in the key area of EU planning and command capabilities. )

Therefore what would remain would be to parametrize as effectively as possible the “ return ” of France in NATO. Clearly, this “ return ” would not amount to the pure-and-simple “ reintegration ” that some hope for and others dread. Regarding the politico-military ( and therefore non-integrated ) bodies, the return to the DPC would be in order: this would be of no great practical consequence ( defence planning having largely become a false pretence ), yet it would be politically useful since France’s return would put an end to the idea of a “ two-tier ” alliance, \(^{32}\) and would enable France to take part in important decisions from which it might otherwise be excluded. ( An example of the latter is the anti-missile defence project which could be decided in the DPC. ) On the other hand, France’s

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\(^{32}\) It will be recalled that the NATO crisis of February 2003 over the allies’ preparation for defending Turkey in the event of an operation against Iraq ( which Paris, Berlin and Brussels interpreted as a de facto condoning of the next American operation ), had been resolved thanks to a decision made to that effect at the DPC, therefore excluding France. Even if this procedure had been implemented with the approval of Paris ( which thus did not have to reverse its opinion ), its effect had been to stress the special status of France, lending credibility to the idea of a two-tier ( or a “ 18 + 1 ” ) alliance, thereby giving rise to the “ unreliable ally ” accusations that were brought against France.

\(^{33}\) See the preceding note.
participation in the NPG—and not its “return,” since it never served on the latter—would probably not be timely, despite this body’s lack of operational significance, because it would lend too much importance to the nuclear aspects of defence, while at the same time linking it closely to the United States and the United Kingdom, which would obviously pose some domestic and international policy problems.

As for the “integrated” bodies per se, the French move should be carefully orchestrated. On the one hand, it is a matter of achieving increased visibility for France, notably by being assigned command responsibilities (whether on a national or a rotating basis), which implies substantially augmenting French personnel beyond the one hundred or so officers already “integrated” into the structure since 2004. On the other hand, France has to avoid a “big” comeback that would scarcely make sense (why invest massively in a structure deemed inadequate?), which would present some practical drawbacks (difficulty of supplying a consistent number of competent officers at the expense of other national, and particularly European, structures, high financial burden of such an effort) and, worse still, political ones (obsolete image of a “reintegration” into the “old NATO” and running the risk that the French “return” would be interpreted as a sheer abandonment of past policies). Thus it would seem to be a matter of defining a “break-even point” below which the French “return” would not be worthwhile, and above which the latter would be too costly financially and, above all, politically. In other words, France should not strive for parity with the United Kingdom or with Germany at whatever cost, especially in terms of personnel assigned to the structure (which is about one thousand for each of these two countries). Therefore what it should do is implement the process economically—a “reintegration” process a minima, and consequently one whose significance would be more symbolic or political than practical or military.

Finally, what is required is, in fact, to manage the symbolic dimension of the “return to NATO.” Such is undoubtedly the key difficulty in connection with the “normalization” scenario: ignorance on the part of many French people—even within their own political class—of the reality of the country’s involvement in the Alliance, which has been the case for several decades (hence the use of quotation marks whenever we have discussed a “return,” since France never actually “left” NATO in the first place, but at most its military “integration”—a term that in turn has become for the most part obsolete).34 This ignorance dates as far back as the very decision made by General de Gaulle, whose declaratory speech has always been overstated in relation to operational reality—accounting for the growing gap, since then, between the image of an “independent” France and its increasingly close involvement in NATO.35 That involvement, however, in no way conflicts with the very principles of the country’s foreign and security policy: it will now be up to President Sarkozy, should he so decide, to educate the French in this area, which is long overdue.

CONCLUSION

Between the two scenarios that appear conceivable today—that of pursuing the “incremental” approach which has prevailed so far in relations between France and NATO, or that of pursuing a “normalization,” however limited it may be in practice—the difference, given the current reality of France’s position within the Alliance, has become primarily a matter of style and tactics. This is not meant to minimize what is at stake for its foreign and security policy: what is playing out in these two scenarios is, in many ways, a debate between a defence of the Gaullist legacy and a desire to break away from the past, between maintaining the “doctrine” and clarifying French “discourse,” as well as between a policy of continuity and a change-oriented diplomacy. No one doubts that the new President, by temperament as well as logic, will be more inclined to choose the second option.

The next few months will determine whether this, indeed, will be his choice. Nonetheless, it is likely that the world will witness the end of the French Atlantic “exception” in the next few years, at least from a formal and organizational viewpoint. Whether or not the French leaders opt for a successfully completed “normalization,” the institutional “distinction” that France has clung to for the last forty years is coming to an end. The actual involvement of France in NATO operations and its twenty-year-long pursuit of an ever-closer pragmatic cooperation with its military structures, combined with the evolution in the logic of the Alliance itself, have resulted in a situation

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34. See note 5, above.
35. On this point, see F. Bozo, La France et l’OTAN, op. cit.
in which the “special position” of France within the latter will no longer correspond to anything but a tenuous reality, which the French should be willing to acknowledge from this point forward. In this sense, Sarkozy’s policy must, indeed, help put an end to a “taboo.”

From a more functional, or simply political, viewpoint, it is a lot less certain, on the other hand, that the French “exception” is actually coming to an end, even if the “renovation” process, and thus institutional “normalization,” were to succeed. Concerning the major issues that today are still the role and mission of the Alliance, its limits and geographic perimeters and, lastly, its operations and internal balances, France continues, as we have said, in entertaining a vision that is far from being the same as that of the United States or of their key allies, if only because of its ambitions and its own European project. These ambitions and this project are bound to induce France not to be content with the Atlantic status quo and to demand not only a true aggiornamento of the Alliance, but also an in-depth transformation of the Euro-Atlantic relationship. All indications tend to show that the next few years will continue to be marked by serious divergences within the Alliance, of which France and the United States will continue to represent the two opposing poles. Beyond the current phase in which the special institutional position of France is being redefined, the French Atlantic “exception” therefore can look forward—regardless of the outcome—to some gratifying days ahead. Yet one more reason, perhaps, to definitively resolve the incidental in order to better focus on the essential.