

Chiara Rogate

France returns to NATO's integrated military system: Sarkozy's sea change?

Right from the first months of his presidency, and in particular during the Bucharest summit conference last April, Sarkozy announced his desire to reintegrate France into the NATO military system, an act that has formally taken place during the celebrations for the Alliance's 60th anniversary. The new president's decision seems to indicate an epochal change in the relations between France and NATO since 1966, the year De Gaulle withdrew French troops from the integrated military system. This is an historic moment not only for the NATO-France relationship but also for French diplomacy, indicating relinquishment of the value traditionally given to autonomy in national defense and of its highly independent politics, as well as a desire to build a Europe serving as a counterweight to the United States.

The entity of this break with the past, and of the *rapprochement* with the American ally, should, however, be contextualized within the evolution of relations between Paris and the Alliance that began under Chirac's presidency and be viewed as the aim of a broader path taken in response to the need to rework France's relations with the Atlantic Alliance after the

end of the Cold War. Furthermore, Sarkozy's decision has to be seen as a pragmatic expression of France's increasing participation in NATO missions and, in the end, has to be taken as part of the broader strategy Sarkozy and his administration have devised to face the security threats characterizing the new international environment, in which the Gaullist tradition – that Sarkozy himself cites – is seen from a new viewpoint without being totally abandoned.

Sarkozy's "change" sanctions France's formal recognition of the importance of the United States to the Continent's security as well as the Alliance's political and military pertinence to the new world order. Nevertheless, Europe remains the prime concern of French foreign policy and the president's decision, while conceived in line with European defense projects, risks putting a brake on them and negating the legitimacy of further development of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) and even the need for it.

From De Gaulle to Sarkozy

French independence, autonomy, centrality and activism in world politics – the so-called

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Abstract

Sarkozy's decision to rejoin NATO's integrated military structure appears to be a historic turning-point both in French-NATO relations and in France's traditional diplomacy, which seems to be abandoning its "*grandeur*".

However, Sarkozy's decision could be seen more as a formality than a political change and shows both rupture and continuity. It should indeed be contextualized within the broader process in act in French-NATO relations since the end of the Cold War and in the new administration's defence strategy.

Furthermore, this change directly affects further European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) development. In fact, while France defines European security as a foreign policy priority, its re-joining the NATO military structure poses several threats to the ESDP, first of all regarding its legitimacy and necessity.

In the end, the president's new decision evidences, *de facto*, not only European but also French limits of independence where security is concerned, and reveals the political and strategic importance of the Alliance in the new international scenario.

Chiara Rogate è Research Trainee ISPI.

politics of “*grandeur*” – were the aspects characterizing the presidency of De Gaulle and subsequent French presidents until the present day. Along with respect for these principles a perception of the Alliance as being guided by American interests, and therefore unable to provide the nation with security, led to withdrawing French military officials from the integrated military system.

This withdrawal was also spurred by a desire to exert exclusive control over French foreign policy, to circumvent the limits set by participation in a supranational structure and to play an active, central role in world politics. France’s “greatness” in international politics in fact required political autonomy, and independent self-defense was a prerequisite for this.

Furthermore, during the Cold War, France’s position with regard to NATO was definable as *amis, allié, non aligné*. Part of France’s exceptionalism in fact consisted of its determination to represent a sort of third voice in the bipolar system. France tried to compete with the United States in representing the Western world, would have liked to partially reduce the United States’ weight within the Alliance in order to create a better balance between European and American influence and, while remaining loyal to and not opposing the Alliance’s politics and endeavours (*amis, allié*), it considered its diplomatic position and realization of its national identity entirely outside of it (*non aligné*). In other words, French relations with NATO

were defined as a *policy of alliance without integration*¹.

The end of the Cold War required a reformulation of relations with NATO in the framework of a general rethinking of European security policies. After the fall of the Berlin Wall the Alliance was viewed as a relic of the Cold War and a return to the integrated military system was deemed even more unnecessary. According to Paris, the United States should henceforth be excluded from Continental affairs. The French idea was to have an *Europe-puissance* serving as a counterweight to American power and whose autonomy lay precisely in developing a defense policy independent from NATO.

With respect to the above, Sarkozy’s decision therefore appears to be a break with French diplomacy in the past forty years as well as a renunciation of the peculiarities distinguishing not only France’s foreign policy and security but even its national identity and exceptionalism. In fact, the re-entry of French military officials into the integrated military system leads to and formalizes a normalization of relations with the US as well as the end of the friction between French and American foreign policies. This *rapprochement* also puts an end to the rivalry existing since the end of the Cold War

between NATO and European defense projects and eliminates an impediment – the French stance – to greater cooperation between the two security systems. In fact, the relationship between NATO and the European defense projects sponsored by France are no longer defined as a zero-sum game – the gains on one side meaning losses on the other, as Gaullist tradition would have it – but the opposite, as Sarkozy sees it: between the two collective security tools there is complementarity and reciprocity of means². Although a clear division of tasks and means is yet to be defined, the French view of the division that would be created between NATO and ESDP seems to be the following: NATO would constitute the so-called “*militaire sérieux*” deployed in military intervention while the latter would be the “*militaire léger*” used for reconstruction purposes in the wake of armed intervention. Furthermore, France’s view is coherent with the 2003 Berlin + accords, thanks to which the European Union could avail itself of the Alliance’s military apparatus and, with due reciprocity, as needed NATO could avail

¹ For a closer look at France-NATO relations from the time of De Gaulle’s presidency, see A. MENON, *France, NATO and the Limits of Independence 1981-1997. The Politics of Ambivalence*, New York 2000, pp. 7-60.

² See President Nicolas Sarkozy’s Speech at the Opening of the XV Ambassadors Conference, Elysée Palace, August 27, 2007, <http://www.ambafrance-it.org/spip.php?article1693>; Discours de M. le Président de la République sur la Défense et la Sécurité Nationale, Porte di Versailles, Juin 17, 2008, http://defense.gouv.fr/content/download/120379/1054045/version/2/file/17.06/Defense_et_securite_nationale.pdf.

itself of European civilian means³.

Sarkozy's pragmatism

Various reasons underlie the new president's decision and the change it has created.

First of all, the new stance towards the Atlantic Alliance stems from a new definition of the international environment, its threats and the strategic defense that the new French administration intends to adopt. In fact, the new stance towards NATO is part of a general willingness to pursue a multilateral approach to the challenges posed by globalization and the directly vulnerable position in which France and Europe find themselves. The Atlantic Alliance, together with the United Nations and the African Union, is seen as one of the organizations with which it is strictly necessary to cooperate in order to deal with the interdependencies now characterizing relations between nations⁴.

Secondly, Sarkozy's policy features a pragmatic approach to NATO. France is, in fact, one of NATO's major collaborators, in both financial and troop terms – it ranks fourth in mission participation – and reintegration will enable

it to participate in the planning and command stages, entering decision-making echelons. So the decision is coherent with France's increasing involvement in the Alliance, which now requires an updating of the French position within its military structure.

In the third place, Paris is very intent on influencing NATO transformation, as it was in the past on actively participating on its creation. From this standpoint French strategy has indeed changed: it needs to work within the Alliance, rather than from outside it, in order to influence its evolution.

In the fourth place, Sarkozy's decision is a pragmatic one for three ulterior reasons. A return to the integrated military system serves to reassure France's European allies, fearful of developing European defense projects that would exclude the United States. This reassurance is, in turn, a prerequisite for developing the ESDP itself and at the same time eliminates some obstacles to its advancement. In fact, demonstrating that it does not want to supplant NATO, Paris obtains the end of Washington's skepticism about European defense projects. Finally, *rapprochement* with the United States would enable France to leverage America's influence on Great Britain in order to lessen the latter's disinclination to develop ESDP.

Last but not least, NATO is the only military defense organization that is credible and effective. In fact, neither the Military Staff of the European Union (MSEU) nor the Civilian Planning and

Conduct Capability (CPCC) are able to intervene in high-intensity crises and for any type of intervention – both military and civilian – would entail using the forces each member of the union makes available. Furthermore, should military intervention be required, it would be necessary either to rely on NATO assets or to use headquarters offered by one of the Union member countries⁵.

Sarkozy's sea change?

However, much stressed and considered an historic moment for France's relations with NATO, Sarkozy's decision actually presents, although differently expressed, several aspects in line with past diplomacy and with French identity itself.

First of all, the re-entry of French troops in NATO's military structure is an integral part of an evolution that began under president Chirac, if not actually under the cohabiting Balladour-Mitterand government. From the end of the Cold War on, in fact, rethinking relations with NATO featured partial *rapprochement* processes followed by Paris backing off⁶. With Chirac in particular, the foundations were laid for the current change in relations. In 1995

³ D. DAVID, *France/Otan: la dernière marche*, Politique étrangère, 2, 2008, p. 436.

⁴ See the White Book <http://www.premier-ministre.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/livre.blanc.dossier-presse/pdf, President Nicolas Sarkozy's Speech at the Opening of the Ambassadors Conference, Elysée Palace, August 27, 2007, http://ambfrance-it.org/spip.php?article1693>.

⁵ R. KEMPIN, *Could France Bring NATO and EU Closer Together? Options for the French EU Presidency*, SWP Comments, May 2008, p. 3

⁶ For an in-depth look at these steps and their dynamics, see A. MENON, *France, NATO and the Limits of Independence 1981-1997. The Politics of Ambivalence*, cit., pp. 39-60.

France re-entered the Military Committee and the International Chiefs of Staff; from 1996 to 2002 it played a primary role in negotiations leading to the signing of the Berlin + accords; from 2004 to 2005 French officers commanded NATO troops in both Afghanistan and Kosovo; finally, France was one of the major sponsors of the NATO Response Force (NRF), to the point that its Lisbon headquarters will come under French command as soon as it formally re-enters the Alliance. So as Sarkozy emphasized, the change in relations will be quantitative, not qualitative, an updating of the French presence in the planning and command structure coherent with French participation in missions and with the evolution of the organization.

There is also continuity from the standpoint of France's "grandeur". Its return to NATO is based on a desire to make the Alliance more "European" – a goal considered impossible without the French presence – with a strong reference to the role Paris formerly played in NATO's creation. The decision also serves to improve France's image internationally, within NATO and also within the European Union. In detail, where the first is concerned, Paris is aiming at playing a starring role in transforming the Alliance – it will also be commanding the Norfolk base, home to the Transformation Command – in order to keep the organization's field of action circumscribed to European security interests as well as

screen the entry of new members⁷.

Independence and autonomous self-defense also continue to lie, as since 1966, in France's *force de frappe*, so much so that the only integrated command organization that France will not participate in will be the Nuclear Planning Group.

France twists NATO and ESDP

The continuity of French diplomacy and its objectives can also be found in regard to Europe and the ESDP, whose development should feel a positive influence from France's re-entry into the integrated military system.

In fact, Europe continues to be viewed as a pole of world balance and its «construction continues to be defined as an absolute priority in French foreign policy»⁸. There cannot be a «strong France without Europe, as there cannot be a strong Europe without France...and the birth of a strong Europe, a leader on the international scene, can make a decisive contribution to reconstructing the most efficacious, most just, most harmonious world order»⁹. In

⁷ France is particularly interested in geographically circumscribing the Alliance's sphere of action – it doesn't want it to become global – and in blocking an enlargement of NATO members to states that could make Russia nervous, such as Georgia and Ukraine.

⁸ *President Nicolas Sarkozy's Speech at the Opening of the Ambassadors Conference, Elysée Palace, August 27, 2007, <http://ambfrance-it.org/spip.php?article1693>.*

⁹ *Ibidem.*

Sarkozy's speech there is a general emphasis on Europe, and NATO (as well as France's re-entry into its integrated command) by comparison have a marginal place.

Initially, following announcement of the re-entry, Sarkozy declared that it would depend on a strengthening of European defense projects and on new vigour in strengthening the European army. These conditions – or, better, the lack of respect for them – led to the emergence of problems jeopardizing the priority and importance given to Europe. On the one hand, in fact, a timing problem arises: developing the ESDP depends on French re-entry into NATO and, vice-versa, the latter seems to be necessary for the former. On the other hand, the priority given to re-entry could have serious repercussions on the credibility of French commitment to, and intentions regarding, the ESDP.

There is also the risk that the ESDP could be perceived as redundant by other European countries, already skeptical about its development and increasingly diffident about spending for defense. In fact, little *need* is seen for developing a European defense system separate from NATO when all the European Union members are also members of NATO.

Moreover, the relationship between the two that would be created is not yet clear, and however much closer collaboration – inaugurated by the Berlin + accords – looks like a great opportunity, it comes accompanied by a parallel risk of de-legitimizing the European defense projects.

As Madeleine Albright pointed out after the end of the Cold War three risks – the so-called 3D – seem to follow the development of an autonomous European defense, two of them in particular: *duplication* (of NATO's tools) and *découplage* (between the two sides of the Atlantic Ocean)¹⁰.

A further question arises from the new stance taken by the Sarkozy government. The new president's decision not only confirms the centrality of the United States where the security of the Continent is concerned, but the re-entry of French troops into NATO means formal confirmation of it.

As we have seen, this leads to various problems in developing European defense. And above all, it is not clear what kind of independence could the ESDP could have if its development is linked, more or less directly, to the United States.

Conclusion

Despite seeming a sea change with the past, French reintegration into NATO's military structure reveals a fairly good degree of continuity with it. On the one hand it is part of a broader

process aiming at redefining the French position within the Alliance that began with the end of the Cold War. On the other, it's contextualized in the administration's long-term strategy devised to face new security challenges.

Nevertheless the French president's decision is relevant because it expresses French *grandeur* in a different way and poses major risks to the development of an independent European defense policy.

Sarkozy's decision therefore evidences, de facto, the limits of independence, not only European but also French, where security is concerned. Furthermore this decision, preceded by an increase in French troop participation as NATO missions augmented, reveals the political and strategic importance of the Alliance in the new international context. De facto this importance is also recognized by those who – France – had considered it a Cold War relic, an organization run by the United States, unable to meet its own security needs and destined to disappear in favor of an autonomous European defense system.

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ISPI
Palazzo Clerici
Via Clerici, 5
I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it

Per informazioni:
ispi.policybrief@ispionline.it
ispi.policybrief1@ispionline.it

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¹⁰ The 3D were identified in duplication, decoupage and discrimination against allies not belonging to the European Union. For a deeper look, see J.S. MONGRENIER, *L'Otan au coeur des relations franco-américaines. Stratégies, représentation géopolitiques et enjeux de sécurité*, p. 12 (Forthcoming).