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**De Gaulle, Alliances,
and Minor Powers**

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Introduction

Among the concepts most commonly associated with General de Gaulle's foreign policy, the expressions "grandeur" - or more precisely "grandeur de la France" - tend to dominate.¹ Taken in isolation such a concept conjures up an image of a foreign policy exclusively concerned with power and rank, and dominated by great power politics. On the other hand the majority of the states with whom France had to deal, either on a bilateral basis or within a multilateral framework such as the wartime alliance, the Western Union, NATO, or the European Communities, fell outside the category of great powers. It therefore seems worth asking what place, if any, such minor or "middle" powers occupied in de Gaulle's view of international relations. Did such states have a particular role to play, or were they in varying degrees - for example in alliance contexts - just pawns in the great power game? If the latter, how could such a view be squared with another of de Gaulle's hallowed concepts, that of "la souveraineté nationale"?

General de Gaulle's first experiences as an actor in international relations was as leader of the "Free French" during the Second World War. This makes the war years a natural point of departure for an investigation of his vision or view of international politics. The wartime years were of course an abnormal period of international relations in almost every way. The abnormality was compounded by the special circumstances attending France's military defeat in 1940: France's official status as partly occupied, partly a nominally independent "Etat" under the Vichy régime, and de Gaulle's uncertain status as the self-appointed guardian of the "real France" - "la France combattante".

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As formative years for a more long-term conception of international relations and of France's place in the world, the years from 1940 to 1944 were therefore conducive to a somewhat distorted perspective on the way foreign policy is made and conducted. Military strength and power were inevitably the predominant determinants of influence. Economic strength, social cohesion, and a national political consensus, while important, tended to be measured only in terms of their contribution to the country's war-making capacity.

Against such a background, it should come as no surprise if de Gaulle's vision of international relations, and of the role of France, became indelibly marked by an almost obsessive concern with a hierarchy of power whose "ultima ratio" was military strength. As a corollary one would expect to find a concomitant indifference - perhaps even mingled with contempt - towards nations that lacked such power. Does the historical evidence support such an image of de Gaulle and his views?

The War Years

De Gaulle's concern with power or the lack thereof is clear already in the first volume of his war memoirs. The humiliating situation of France - "qui, elle, n'avait rien," is compared to

"les gouvernements réfugiés en Angleterre, dont sans doute les forces étaient faibles, mais dont la représentation et l'influence internationales subsistaient.

Car, pour chacune des nations d'Europe que submergeaient les armées d'Hitler, l'Etat avait emporté sur des rivages libres l'indépendance et la souveraineté (...). Si dépouillés qu'ils fussent, il leur restait toujours quelque chose."²

Already at this stage, however, emerges de Gaulle's vision of France as the natural leader of Europe, and of himself as the true representative of France. He speaks of the unhappiest of the exiles, the Poles and the Czechs, who saw in him a hope and a rallying point because he remained faithful to the traditions of France. "Jamais peut-être, mieux qu'au fond de ce gouffre, je n'ai senti ce qu'était, pour le monde, la vocation de la France."³

De Gaulle's vision of France as a future leader of Europe was clearly linked with what he saw as the dependence of the middle and minor European nations on either "les anglo-saxons" or the Soviet Union. Even if their formal sovereignty was not contested by the allied great powers, the nations in exile "n'en subissaient pas moins le sort pénible des faibles livrés à la discrétion des forts".⁴ Hence their firm conviction, according to de Gaulle, that the equilibrium in Europe and their own future depended on the restoration of France.

In support of this concept of France as the leader of Europe de Gaulle cites in particular the example of Czechoslovakia, whose apparent good relations with the Soviet Union shielded an under-current of deep apprehensions about the future. He then quotes President Benes to the effect that only if France resumed her rightful rank and role in Europe could his country avoid the risks inherent in an exclusive alliance with the Kremlin.⁵ In a similar but less hopeful vein general Sikorski is reported as seeing a Western counter-balance as Poland's only chance to achieve an understanding with Stalin. "Le moment venu, qui aidera la Pologne? Ce sera la France ou personne."⁶

Without necessarily questioning the sincerity of such statements, made by Benes and Sikorski in conversations with de Gaulle, they hardly reflect the whole picture as regards the two countries' views of France and her future role. De Gaulle nevertheless appropriates the vision. Subsequently, with "La France Combattante" more firmly established and widely recognised under a provisional government in Alger, de Gaulle expands the perspective. By 1943 he begins to see France as the only power able and willing to prevent a Soviet-American hegemony over Europe. And France would not only be guarding her own interests: "Elle y serait, au surplus, comme le porte-parole des moyennes et petites nations."⁷

Up until then de Gaulle's perspective as regards middle and small powers seems limited to the "Etats de la Vistule, du Danube, des Balkans", whose independence is likely to be sacrificed as the price of Soviet-American cooperation. But later in 1943, as he begins to concern himself with the more long-term problems of the European order, the northern European countries are also brought into the picture. During a

brief "tour d'horizon" he notes that the future problems for Belgium and the Netherlands are primarily economic, whereas Norway is beginning to feel the weight of her Soviet neighbour. All three countries, however, seem to look primarily to the United States as their source of strength. He also notes, without expressing any particular interest, Belgian schemes for a Western European confederation as well as Norway's plans for an Atlantic alliance.

His knowledge of Norway's 'Atlantic policy' stemmed from a conversation he had with Ernst F. Hougen, who was Norway's diplomatic envoy to the CFLN at Alger, on 17 December 1943. But de Gaulle's remarks provide little insight into his own views of postwar international and security affairs. Besides stressing the importance of security in the air and on the seas, he insists on the necessity of viewing the problems in a comprehensive European perspective. However,

"à défaut d'une sécurité européenne, comprenant aussi bien la Russie que les puissances de l'Ouest, on pourrait imaginer une sécurité Atlantique mais largement Atlantique et comprenant, bien entendu, la France."⁸

De Gaulle's main concern at that time is the countries bordering on the Mediterranean. He appears to have found among Greek politicians the same desire for a French presence to counter-balance that of the leading allied powers, and makes unsuccessful attempts to establish contact with General Mihailovic in Yugoslavia. Through it all he complains bitterly about France being excluded from European affairs by the "Big Three". He sees Roosevelt and Churchill as being prepared to abandon Central and Eastern Europe to Stalin, and notes again and again the desire of the exiled leaders from those countries for a French counterweight.

De Gaulle is far less specific when describing what the policy and actions of France would have been if admitted to the inner councils of the alliance. Only in the case of Poland does he outline a policy. He finds acceptable Stalin's plan to move Poland westward into Prussia and Silesia, but would oppose the installation of a Soviet puppet regime in Warsaw. But his recipe for a solution hardly meets his own test, according to which "La diplomatie (...) ne connaît que les réalités".⁹

"Je pensais que l'Amérique, l'Angleterre et la France, en affirmant conjointement ceci et cela à la face du monde, en agissant de concert dans ce sens auprès des Gouvernements soviétique et polonais, en réservant aux flottes combinées de l'Occident l'accès futur des ports de la Baltique, quitte à ouvrir aux navires russes celui des ports de la mer du Nord, auraient pu faire en sorte que la liberté fût, finalement, rendue à la noble et vaillante Pologne."¹⁰

Again, therefore, he seeks umbrage in the image of France and himself as the chosen moral leader of Europe. "Ainsi, malgré les conseils d'abstention donnés par Washington, Londres, et Moscou, on voyait les moyens et petits Etats européens rechercher notre contact."¹¹ As final proof of this he cites the long list of European governments which in June, 1944, recognise officially - in open defiance of the advice from the United States and Britain - his Provisional Government of the French Republic.

If our brief review of de Gaulle's ideas on foreign policy during the wartime years have given very few clues to his more long-term vision of international relations, the most likely explanation is that in war foreign policy forms an integrated and largely subservient part of war policy. Urgent concerns connected with the conduct of the war leave little space for the luxury of long-term policy planning and preparations. For de Gaulle, the permanent and daily preoccupation was to reconstruct France's position as a major power.

However, even in de Gaulle's relations with the allied great powers there may be clues to be found - clues to his view of the nature of alliances and of alliance policy. De Gaulle's stormy relations with Great Britain, in particular, reflect a view of alliance relationships which points very clearly to the problems that de Gaulle was later to create for the Atlantic alliance.

Students of alliance relationships have elaborated a concept which is called "dogmatic/nationalist" alliance policy.¹² This is an approach wherein an allied government, with complete independence as its point of departure, seeks to limit alliance commitments to formally negotiated and clearly defined arrangements, and chooses conflict rather than submitting to loose, *ad hoc*, or informal compromise solutions of the problems of

cooperation. Along with this goes a style or a posture dominated by questions of prestige and status, and marked by an emphasis on the external symbols of independence and national self-determination.

It will surprise no one that de Gaulle and the Free French present the primary example of such an approach to alliance relationships. It was an approach which bore the markings of a dangerous gamble, since it carried a constant risk of serious conflicts, each of which could have spelt final ruin for the frail structure of France in exile. And de Gaulle could hardly have been unaware that it was a gamble: one of the causes of the rupture between him and admiral Muselier in 1941 was Muselier's "adjurations à ne pas mettre en péril les alliances de la France libre par des initiatives trop cassantes."¹³

It is also possible in de Gaulle's posturing to discern an attitude which equates power status with an ally's "nuisance value", and which regards "loyal allies" with a condescension bordering on contempt. On one occasion he attempted to justify his independent actions by picturing the exiles as on the whole a melancholy lot: "C'est pourqu'à la longue ils prennent l'aspect de leurs hôtes et deviennent un objet de mépris pour leur propre peuple."¹⁴ Less serious, but nonetheless revealing, is de Gaulle's retort to Anthony Edens complaint about France being more difficult to handle than all the other exiled allies: "Je n'en doute pas. La France est une grande puissance."¹⁵

The alternative to de Gaulle's alliance policy would have been what political scientists have called the "pragmatic/associationist" approach¹⁶, as exemplified by the policy of the Norwegian government in exile. It was a policy marked by a flexible *ad hoc* approach to the problems of allied cooperation, emphasising mutual interests with the aim of mutual trust and reasonable, practical compromises. Such a policy required a realistic acknowledgement of the dominant position of greater powers, and of their right to decide in matters not directly affecting Norwegian interests. Having thus established Norway's credentials as a loyal ally, the government would then expect to be listened to, and increasingly to have influence over, allied policies which concerned vital Norwegian interests.

The wartime alliance, then, was the test-bed for two contrasting patterns for relations between major and minor partners - one based on independence and self-determination, the other on inter-dependence and integration. Both were attempts to solve one common problem, which in its French version was stated as being "comment faire prendre en compte par la stratégie alliée certains impératifs nationaux?"¹⁷ It may be said, with hindsight, that the diametrically opposed French and Norwegian approaches to alliance policy were both successful. But whereas de Gaulle's success was less due to his policy than to Britain's desire for a restoration of France as an important European power, Norway's success was the result of a policy concept with important long-term implications for alliance relationships between major and minor powers.

De Gaulle in NATO: Coalition or Integration?

Being out of power during the formative years of western postwar security, de Gaulle has left few indications of how his view of alliance relationships may have developed during that period. But in a speech in Marseilles in April, 1948, he acknowledged that the postwar situation posed new requirements for a successful defence cooperation. His preoccupation, naturally, was with Europe, which he considered should be organised "en un tout économique et stratégique (...) lié aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique sous forme de garantie réciproque".¹⁸ At a press conference six years later, in April 1954, he was much more specific:

"Mais je vois l'Europe comme elle est. Je la vois étendue de Gibraltar à l'Oural, du Spitzberg à la Sicile.(...) Une telle association, pour ce qui est, par exemple, de la défense, doit être, bien sur, organisée. La réunion organique des chefs de gouvernement en exercera la conduite par le moyen d'un organisme spécialisée et subordonnée. Des commandements et états-majors combinés, la mise en commun, pour l'emploi, de l'infrastructure, des communications, des ravitaillements, l'adoption des types semblables d'unités, d'armes, de procédés assureront la cohésion technique des forces associés, tout en laissant à chaque État le corps et l'âme de son armée."¹⁹

It is difficult to reconcile this image of a "réunion organique des chefs de gouvernement" with de Gaulle's subsequent advocacy of a directory for NATO composed solely of the three major powers, the United States,

Great Britain, and France. And his suggestions about "commandements et états-majors combinés", as well as "la mise en commun, pour l'emploi, de l'infrastructure, des commuunications, des ravitaillements", seem to contradict his later decision to withdraw from NATO's integrated defence structure.

De Gaulle's policy towards NATO has mainly, if not exclusively, been studied in terms of a conflict between France and the other major powers of the Alliance - particularly, of course, the United States. The views and attitudes of the minor powers have largely been ignored. However, President Eisenhower in his reply to de Gaulle's "directory" proposal of 1958 emphasised the interests of the other member states:

"Nous ne pouvons nous permettre d'adopter un système qui donnerait l'impression à nos autres allies (...) que des décisions capitales, touchant leurs intérêts vitaux, sont prises sans leur participation."²⁰

There can be no doubt that Eisenhower here reflected the deeply felt concerns of the minor allies, lest they should be excluded from participation in important decisions affecting also the alliance. This secret exchange of letters did not yet constitute an open challenge. But the gauntlet was thrown, and the dimensions of the issue were clearly realised by France's Common Market partners as the gist of de Gaulle's demand became known. In Alfred Grosser's words:

"Not without reason they felt that the General's attitude towards the weaker in Europe resembled the one for which he justifiably reproached the United States on the transatlantic level. But there were two major differences: He did not have the same preponderance vis-a-vis the weaker, and could not give them protection."²¹

A reminder of the apprehensions felt by the minor powers came during the discussions on the "Fouchet Plan", as the Netherlands and Belgium fought to preserve Atlantic relations against de Gaulle's conception of a Europe based on the joint predominance of France and the German Federal Republic. Evidently, for the small powers, "the distant superpower, the United States, was perceived as less oppressive than the neighbouring medium-sized powers and their striving for dominance in Europe."²²

It is hardly necessary here to retrace the various steps by which de Gaulle during the years from 1958 to 1966 gradually sought to regain France's freedom of action in defence matters. The staged withdrawals of the French Mediterranean, and subsequently the Atlantic and Channel, fleets from NATO's command structure in peacetime were signals, but did not in themselves constitute a major threat to the integrated defence. Navies were mobile, and it had always been understood - even if not openly acknowledged - that alliance powers with overseas responsibilities had priorities which in a given situation might override their commitments to NATO. As for de Gaulle's apparent major preoccupation, the procurement of an independent nuclear deterrent, the various schemes discussed during the 1960s for sharing nuclear weapons information and policy-making defused the issue for the time being. Also, as Lothar Ruehl has written,

"Les alliés s'étaient habitués à penser que les déclarations du Général de Gaulle dépasseraient toujours ses véritables intentions; qu'il serait beaucoup plus conciliant qu'il ne le laissait paraître."²³

The Crisis of 1966

De Gaulle's declaration at his press conference on 21 February 1966, followed by his letter to President Lyndon Johnson on 7 March and the "aides-mémoire" to the other NATO members four days later, set the stage for a major crisis situation in the alliance. The decision to withdraw from the integrated defence commands and other arrangements was momentous enough by itself. But the short time limits allowed for carrying out the withdrawals acerbated the crisis, and gave it an air of deliberate provocation which seemed calculated to eliminate all hopes of compromise.

The reactions of the United States and other major NATO members to the crisis have been extensively studied and debated. But how were the minor powers affected, and what were their reactions?

The initial reaction of the minor powers was to associate themselves with the other members of NATO in a joint declaration, which was made

public on 18 March. This affirmed a common determination to maintain as far as possible the military and political cooperation established through NATO. The process of formulating the declaration revealed certain differences of opinion between those who felt a need to castigate France and others - particularly Norway, Denmark, and Canada - which felt that any polemics would be not only useless, but also counter-productive in view of the incumbent negotiations with France. Judging from the reactions in Norway, this implied a desire to minimise the disruptive effects of the French move.

In presenting the views of the Norwegian Government to the *Storting* - the national legislative assembly - the Defence Minister outlined two principal considerations to be kept in mind during the coming negotiations about the modalities of the French withdrawal. Preserving the maximum degree of cooperation among the member states was one of them: "As long as no alternative has been produced which could offer Norway anything like the degree of security provided through western solidarity, this was the only way".²⁴ Of particular importance was the preservation of the integrated defence structure, not only from considerations of military efficiency but also from a desire to forestall nationalistic urges in other countries - the latter being a thinly veiled reference to Germany.

Norway's other main consideration was to avoid lasting damage to relations with France:

"France has herself expressed an interest in cooperative peacetime arrangements directly aimed towards a war situation. There is every reason to believe that all 14 nations will see a common interest in keeping France - one of the technically and militarily most advanced countries of Europe - as an ally."²⁵

The debates in the Norwegian *Storting* showed a wide consensus on the Government's attitude on those two major points. Several speakers, however, laid major emphasis on the point that "an integrated defence is the best defence and also the form of defence that gives the greater influence to the minor powers."²⁶ Norway's foreign minister from 1946 to 1965, Halvard Lange, summed up the arguments in favour of NATO's integrated defence system:

"The policy of the French Government aims to break down the unified command apparatus, and to make more difficult a continued American military presence in Europe. If it should succeed, such a policy runs the risk of removing the security policy basis for the relative *détente* which we currently enjoy in our part of the world.

And what would the French Government put in its place? In so far as its purpose can be discerned, it seeks an alliance commitment which is not anchored in strong common institutions in either the political or military field. An alternative network of bilateral arrangements has been suggested. This would mean reverting to the state of affairs of the interwar or pre-World War I periods - a period when all the minor powers of Europe were but objects in the games of the great powers, with extremely limited possibilities of exerting any influence whatsoever on their destiny."²⁷

With those words a senior statesman in NATO expressed what has later been echoed by several distinguished students of international affairs and of European security problems: The dichotomy between, on the one hand, international security cooperation based on the nineteenth century concept of alliances as essentially bilateral reassurance arrangements controlled by the major powers, and on the other hand the mid-twentieth century creation of an integrated, multilateral security system where each member nation preserved an influence commensurate with its contribution to the common security. Only this latter alternative offered an opportunity for the minor powers to exert some influence.²⁸ By failing to grasp this paradigmatic conflict, or at least try to accommodate those which adhered to the latter concept, de Gaulle and his Government demonstrated a disregard for the concerns of the minor powers which was bound to have long-term effects on those powers' attitudes to and relations with France.

Conclusion

In his penetrating analysis of de Gaulle's foreign policy²⁹, Philip G. Cerny identifies three conditions that had to be fulfilled if the politics of *grandeur* were to succeed in its purpose of increasing France's standing in the world. One requirement was a domestic consensus in support of the necessary "balancing act between national ambition and the avoidance of excessive risk or overextension". Another was the need to keep the "grand design" itself "sufficiently flexible and sufficiently predictive to be able

both to follow and to shape the actual course of events in the international system as a whole over time." The first of those conditions may have been fulfilled. The same can hardly be said for the second one, particularly if the perspective "over time" is extended to include the post-de Gaulle years. Where de Gaulle failed most clearly, however, was in relation to a third, and probably the most important, requirement:

"France must not merely represent the French national interest as acting against the interests of other states, but rather as creating a solidarity of interests with the others. Thus French policy had to appeal to a sufficiently widely accepted general or universal principle to ensure the active or tacit support of other states in international dealings."

At least in relation to France's NATO allies, and notably the minor powers in the alliance, the "solidarity of interests" that de Gaulle presumably hoped would emerge, based on the restoration of national independence in defence and security policy, did not materialise. Instead, de Gaulle's NATO policy served to reinforce an existing image of France as the exponent "par excellence" of a self-centred foreign policy.

Notes

1. See Philip G. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) p. 1-7.
2. General de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L'Appel* (Plon, Paris, 1954) p. 104-5.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 266.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 268.
7. General de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L'Unité* (Plon, Paris 1956) p. 230.
8. Quai d'Orsay archives, Guerre 1938-1945, Alger CFLN vol. 1439.
9. General de Gaulle, *Mémoires de Guerre: L'Unité* (Plon, Paris 1956), p. 229.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
12. See the chapter on "The cohesion of alliances" in George Liska, *Nations in Alliance* (Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore 1962).
13. Jean Lacouture, *Charles de Gaulle*, vol. 1: *Le rebelle* (Seuil, Paris 1984) p. 496.
14. Quoted - with his own translation - by D.W. Johnson in "Le Gaullisme à Londres" (unpublished paper presented to the 1977 London conference on "Governments in exile in London during the Second World War") p. 20.

15. D.W. Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 4.
16. G. Liska, *Nations in Alliance*, *loc. cit.*
17. Quoted from J. Delmas, "Organisation du Haut Commandement Francais en 1943-1945", in *Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire* No. 47, 1980, p. 72.
18. General de Gaulle, *Discours et Messages* vol. II p. 184-5.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 608.
20. Quoted from the French version in J. Lacouture, *De Gaulle 2. Le Politique (1944-1959)* p. 641.
21. A. Grosser, *The Western Alliance* (London 1980) p. 188.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
23. Lothar Ruehl, *La Politique Militaire de la Ve Republique* (Paris 1976) p. 46.
24. *Stortingsforhandlingar* (Proceedings of the National Assembly) 1965-66. Vol. 7C p. 2897.
25. *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*
26. *Ibid.*, p. 2912, cf. p. 2893-4, 2908-9, 2922, 2949, 2954, 2961.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 2944.
28. Cf. i. a. Elliot Goodman, "De Gaulle's NATO Policy in Perspective", in *Orbis*, Fall 1966; Herman Kahn, "Our Alternatives in Europe", in *Foreign Affairs*, July 1966.
29. Philip G. Cerny, *op. cit.*, p. 129.