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DeGaulle, NATO, and Gaullist Foreign Policy

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De Gaulle, NATO, and Gaullist Foreign Policy

Introduction

In early 1966, General Charles de Gaulle announced that France would modify the conditions of her participation in the Atlantic Alliance.[1] This decision resulted in the removal of French ground and air forces and headquarters personnel from the NATO commands, the evacuation of US and Canadian forces from French soil, and the relocation of NATO headquarters and installations in neighboring countries. Although subsequent negotiations worked out terms for continued military cooperation between France and NATO, de Gaulle's action precipitated the most serious crisis in the history of the Atlantic Alliance.

De Gaulle's decision, its place in Gaullist foreign policy, the reactions of Alliance partners, and the effects on NATO have been written about extensively.[2] This paper is not intended, therefore, to provide a narrative of these events, which the reader is presumed to be familiar. Rather, it is an attempt to understand de Gaulle's *decision-making framework* in terms of his perceptions, choices, and expectations by examining the NATO withdrawal and other relevant examples of his foreign policies. From this, we can hopefully integrate the key of factors which explain his decisions, conceptualize his strategy as a decision-maker, and assess his performance in achieving his foreign policy goals.[3]

De Gaulle's View of France as a World Player

When he returned to government in 1958, General de Gaulle was determined to elevate France to a prominent international role. In his view, the relegation of France to the status of a middle class power in the post-World War II bipolar world was unacceptable, and his bitter condemnation of the leaders of the Fourth Republic was based, in part, on their acceptance of this subordinate role. De Gaulle's goal was to reestablish France's standing as a first-rate power that exemplified, in the words of one author, the Gaullist ideal of French "independence and grandeur."[4]

With this vision as the foundation of his foreign and defense policies, it is clear that de Gaulle viewed the French position in the Atlantic Alliance and, in particular, its participation in NATO as incompatible with France's reemergence as a great power. De Gaulle's own security plan for continental Europe consisted of a federation of independent Western and other European nations under French hegemony, but this could only be realized if NATO was dismantled and US and British ascendancy in West European defense integration was ended.[5] Consequently, de Gaulle had numerous reasons for first proposing in 1958 that NATO be supplanted or replaced:

- NATO structurally codified US hegemony in Western Europe. When coupled with the US-British "special relationship," these arrangements assured "Anglo-Saxon" (de Gaulle's term) domination of Europe and assigned France a position of dependence and subordination to the policies of Washington and London.
- The alliance based the defense of France on the forces and commitments of other states--especially the United States--which prevented Paris from exercising her full sovereignty as a nation-state. In addition, US-Soviet hostility created the possibility that France could be drawn unwillingly into a war between those two states as a result of her alliance membership. For a nation to enjoy authority, dignity, and prestige in the eyes of its people, according to de Gaulle, it must assume direct responsibility for its defense and have sole control over its armed forces. In the General's own words, "France should defend herself by herself for herself and in her own way."[6]
- By remaining in NATO, France could not escape the shadow of the United States and establish itself as an independent power. Such independence was critical to de Gaulle if he hoped to break the bipolar mold of the international system and offer France to other states as a viable leadership alternative to Washington and Moscow.

- Finally, the break would enable de Gaulle to assuage his personal enmity toward the United States and Britain for their belittling treatment of him during World War II. While he demanded to be dealt with as an equal partner, he was, in his view, treated as a junior one. US tardiness in recognizing his government as representing France, and his exclusion from the Yalta Conference--where he was "summoned" by Roosevelt to be informed of the results of the meeting--contributed especially to his embitterment.

De Gaulle's foreign policy blueprint, therefore, can be roughly summarized into a series of interdependent goals. First, to change fundamentally the security framework that existed in Western Europe by taking France out of NATO. Second, to establish France as an independent power in world affairs. Third, to replace the bipolar world with a multi-polar one. Fourth, to have France play a major role in the international system by asserting its hegemonic position in continental Europe, and by serving as the natural leader of those states wishing to exist outside the US and Soviet blocs.

De Gaulle's Assumptions and Approaches

Three key assumptions undergirded de Gaulle's policy goals. First, that nation-states are the basis of the international system and power is the currency of relations among them. Although developments since the war had fostered the emergence of other actors who could initiate policies central to the international system, de Gaulle remained focused on nation-states as the predominant source of international action and as the template of the international hierarchy. Second, that a Soviet invasion of Western Europe was extremely unlikely and communist governments in Eastern Europe were only temporary. These beliefs were essential to de Gaulle's argument that the NATO system of integrated alliance military forces created in 1949 was no longer necessary to protect Western Europe, that Europe should be a confederation of states and not a single integrated unit, and that East European states would someday join his European system. Third, that once Paris established itself as a third center of power in the international system, other states in Europe and the Third World would rally to

the French standard. France, by virtue of its place in history and geographic position on the continent would resume the dominant international role it had played prior to World War II. The validity and representativeness of de Gaulle's assumptions varied. The degree to which they did, as will be seen, contributed significantly to his ability to pursue his strategy and achieve his goals.[7]

De Gaulle employed a confrontational negotiating strategy with other NATO members--especially the United States and Britain--in pursuing his policies. In dealing with the "Anglo-Saxons," he derived a considerable negotiating advantage from his unwillingness to reconsider his decision to leave NATO. Washington attempted to bargain incrementally to appease France and proceeded on the assumption that a solution could be found within the existing Alliance framework. De Gaulle, on the other hand, eschewed the constraints of cooperation and compromise, refused to bargain on matters of high principle, and used the negotiating tool of unilateral action to dramatize his policies. His unwillingness, for example, during tripartite memorandum negotiations to offer detailed plans and direct proposals to transform the Atlantic Alliance into his alternative structure demonstrated de Gaulle's belief that his goals could not be accomplished by altering NATO from within. This fundamental clash of objectives and perceptions kept US leaders searching fruitlessly for a formula to resolve the issue through a negotiated settlement, while de Gaulle remained determined to take France out of NATO and not accept a compromise agreement.[8]

De Gaulle's intransigence on withdrawing from NATO and his fixation on recreating a version of the 19th century Concert of Europe system does not mean that he was incapable of altering French policies--including major shifts--to accommodate new realities in the post-World War II international system. De Gaulle recognized that certain changes would have to be reflected in his security framework, but he was enough of a visionary to believe that they could be incorporated without sacrificing the basic principles of his policies. Indeed, he believed that these developments could even contribute to the furtherance of his goals.

De Gaulle's adaptability was clearly demonstrated in his approach to the thorny problem of colonial independence. Initially, de Gaulle was a believer in empire who supported the retention of colonies as a pillar of France's standing as a great power, and he stressed in the early 1950s the overwhelming need for NATO to guarantee France's position in North Africa. NATO's failure to support Paris in this cause, moreover, was a significant factor in de Gaulle's increasing displeasure with the Alliance.

By the time he came to power in 1958, however, De Gaulle realized that attempts to suppress the swelling independence movements in the colonies was incompatible with his plan for France's new international role. By bestowing independence on France's colonies, de Gaulle freed himself to act on his European and worldwide ambitions. According to his strategy, granting independence and pursuing a broad program of cooperation with the new states in Africa allowed France to present itself as the Third World's most supportive power. Paris could then combine its dominance of a federated Europe with its leadership of new Third World countries to lay claim to its place as a third power center in international affairs. Moreover, de Gaulle was aware of the internal political problems colonial wars had caused the Fourth Republic, and that domestic support for a new form of French hegemony would have to be based on reforming existing policies. He used the war weariness of the French people to build a consensus that colonization was no longer a source of glory, and that his foreign policy design offered the seeds for France's future greatness.[9] He obtained the support of the French people and stated, "By adopting this vast and generous plan (decolonization), the French people are going to contribute once more in their history, to the enlightenment of the world."[10]

De Gaulle as a Decision-Maker

In evaluating Charles de Gaulle's foreign policy, it is important to understand that he practiced a very personal leadership style.[11] For example, only a few close advisors and a small number of French government services participated in the 1965 preparations to pull France out of NATO. De

Gaulle's individualized approach to foreign policy decision-making indicates that he had a high personal investment in the success of these decisions. However, by identifying so much with the choices he made, de Gaulle succumbed to a serious problem that limits the effectiveness of decision implementation when this approach is used: an unwillingness to accommodate unanticipated consequences of decisions by changing them as they are carried out.

His 1965 attack on the Treaty of Rome and suspension of France's participation in all Common Market activities, for example, resulted in him being outmaneuvered by the solid and silent resistance of other members. They refused to negotiate with him until he ended his boycott, a boycott that was growing more unfavorable to France over time. De Gaulle initially expected that other European countries would accede to his demands. When his initial gambit failed, he escalated the conflict despite the relatively greater harm it would cause France instead of seeking to defuse it because of the inherent weakness of the French position. In contrast to the political victory he hoped to offer the French voters, he suffered at the polls in the 1965 election because of his unwillingness to change his policies to dilute the adversity they had created. While an abrupt change in the French position during the latter stages of the presidential campaign allowed a resolution of the crisis, de Gaulle incurred a significant political price for what was seen as his imperious manner and unyielding treatment of France's closest partners. Furthermore, de Gaulle's actions set back his plans for a new European security arrangement by giving its potential participants a troubling look at what life would be like in a confederation under French leadership.[12]

An Assessment of de Gaulle's Performance

De Gaulle's two primary foreign goals were to make France an independent nation and a major power. On balance, he was largely successful in achieving the first goal but was far less so in terms of the second. De Gaulle's strategy in carving out an independent role for France was successful because it could largely be achieved through unilateral action accompanied by diplomatic techniques

intended to thwart a compromise settlement. The withdrawal from NATO was carried out because de Gaulle could act autonomously in his decision-making without requiring the support of other nations or fearing retaliation from them. This behavior was representative of de Gaulle's preferred statecraft and was designed to achieve maximum influence in dealing with other states. His strategy, however, revealed what one author has called the "darker side" of French foreign policy that was often self-defeating because it stressed confrontation over cooperation.[13] The adverse effects of his strategy were obvious in de Gaulle's failure to achieve the second foreign policy goal.

Once out of NATO, de Gaulle failed to attract other European states away from the Alliance or to crack the bipolar world by establishing France as a third center of power. This failure can be attributed to two basic flaws in his foreign policy strategy. First, he was unable/unwilling to devise and implement plans based on the cooperative development of shared goals among equal players who would act jointly to achieve them. His belief in a hierarchical order in the international system and his desire to place France at the apex of that order led him to rely more on coercive than cooperative methods of statecraft, but such instruments were inappropriate for goals that required cooperation over confrontation and compromise over *faits accomplis*.

This failure was evident in the Common Market/Treaty of Rome crisis, where de Gaulle's actions in precipitating the crisis and his confrontational approach in dealing with the resulting fall-out exacerbated the harm inflicted on French interests. His unilateral ultimatums and high-handed approach solidified membership opposition to his demands and created a conflict which de Gaulle's tactics of intransigence only worsened. Although the crisis was resolved, de Gaulle's misreading of the expected outcome of his action, misuse of the tools of statecraft in dealing with other countries, and misunderstanding of the international environment in which his plans were being perceived, undermined his own goal of European unity under French leadership.

The other fundamental cause of de Gaulle's failure to accomplish his second foreign policy goal was his inability to convince other states to accept his vision of a new world order in which France would act as a great power. The reasons for this included:

- Other European states did not share his sanguine view of Soviet intentions. They believed a strong alliance with the United States--even at the expense of American ascendancy in that relationship--was necessary to deter Soviet political ambitions and military capabilities. This view was reinforced in 1968 with the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.
- The French nuclear umbrella was suspect as a credible deterrent force. France's small nuclear force--consisting of Mirage IV planes--was a first-strike force and did not meet the basic objective criteria of deterrence. There also was considerable doubt whether Paris would endure the financial costs of deploying a more survivable second-generation nuclear force.
- France lacked the economic and financial foundation to compete against the United States and Soviet Union as the leader of a bloc of nations. Third World countries especially looked to the two superpowers for economic and developmental assistance, and they linked their political allegiance to the receipt of such aid. France, as a middle-class power with an average amount of resources, simply did not possess the means necessary to fulfill this role.
- De Gaulle did not develop a compelling case--in terms of specific policies and objectives--to support his new world order. While he called for a federated Europe, de Gaulle did not articulate sufficiently detailed plans that laid out in a persuasive fashion how this would be accomplished, the benefits members would derive from participating, and the increases in international stability and progress that his three-power oligarchy would offer over a bipolar world.
- Finally, de Gaulle almost certainly overestimated the support he would receive from other nations in his call for a return to a Concert of Europe system under French leadership. The

prospect of French hegemony in Europe was not naturally appealing to the other states--despite de Gaulle's romanticized interpretation of the 19th century balance of power order--and his foreign policy strategy, as noted, strengthened these states' inclination not to support the emergence of such a system.[14]

This analysis has attempted to demonstrate that Charles de Gaulle's *decision-making framework* was well suited to achieve one of his two foreign policy goals, but poorly designed to accomplish the other. This limitation was compounded by the inflexibility of his foreign policy strategy. While de Gaulle's goals were compatible, their achievement depended on the adoption of different strategies that reflects differences in nations' interests and their policies. By failing to adopt a variable approach in pursuing his goals, de Gaulle did not integrate successfully the varied tools of statecraft, policy instruments, resources, and negotiating principles available to the decision-maker in promoting multiple national interests. De Gaulle sought to change France's place in the existing international system, which he did. De Gaulle also sought to create a new world order in which France would be a first-rate power, which he did not.

[1] Although sometimes used interchangeably, the French did draw a distinction between the Atlantic Alliance and NATO. The former refers to the general system of political relations, while the latter refers to the integrated system of alliance military forces.

[2] See, for example, Michael M. Harrison, *The Reluctant Ally: France and Atlantic Security* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 49-158. See also, Robert S. Lockwood, *Gaullist Foreign Policy: NATO Withdrawal and Systemic Change.* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1977).

[3] The decision-making model has been used by various authors in an effort to improve the understanding of international politics. In his seminal work, for example, Glenn Paige used this approach to analyze the processes whereby the United States became involved in the Korean War. Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean Decision* (New York: The Free Press, 1968), pp. 273-295.

[4] Harrison, *Reluctant Ally*, pp. 49-55.

[5] Edgar S. Furniss, Jr., "De Gaulle's France and NATO: An Interpretation," *International Organization*, XV (1961): 349-365.

[6] Quotation taken from, Charles de Gaulle, *Memoirs of Hope: Renewal and Endeavor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), p. 204.

[7] French policy evolved over time to reflect a modified version of de Gaulle's original position. France maintained its rejection of NATO integration but affirmed strongly the importance of the Alliance. For a more contemporary view of French policy on this issue, see, Francois de Rose, *European Security and France.* Trans. Richard Nice. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984).

[8] For an excellent study of de Gaulle's negotiating strategy on the NATO withdrawal issue, from which this summary is taken, see, Michael M. Harrison and Mark G. McDonough, *Negotiations on the French Withdrawal from NATO.* (Washington, D.C.: The Johns Hopkins Foreign Policy Institute, 1987).

[9] For a more complete discussion of French colonial policy during this period, see, Guy de Carmoy, *The Foreign Policies of France 1944-1968.* Trans. Elaine P. Halperin. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 127-244.

[10] Quotation taken from Harrison, *Reluctant Ally*, p. 53.

[11] Models based on psychological interpretations of the behavior of important actors have been developed to explain and predict actions in the international system. Most case studies, however, have focused on American leaders. For one example of this methodological approach, see, James David Barber, *Politics by Humans.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1988), pp. 88-126.

[12] An excellent biography of Charles de Gaulle which examines this and other key episodes during his presidency is, Don Cook, *Charles de Gaulle: A Biography.* (New York: G.P. Putnam's, 1983).

[13] Harrison, *Reluctant Ally*, pp. 49-71.

[14] Cook, *de Gaulle*, pp. 355-372.