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**THE SPIRIT OF FRANCE**  
Core Course (1) Essay

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This paper examines the foreign policy objectives of Charles de Gaulle. What was his strategy to obtain France's national security objectives? Was the strategy effective and did it succeed?

## **INTRODUCTION**

Charles de Gaulle instinctively brings to mind France. His powerful personality, impressionistic political skill and vision for his country has, over time, made "de Gaulle" synonymous with France.

Demonstrating unyielding perseverance to elevate France to a position of respect in the world arena de Gaulle aggressively pursued national interest objectives to:

- \* Restore French national identity.
- \* Recapture France's position of power and influence in Europe and elsewhere. (grandeur)

His strategy (independence), diplomatic style (obstructive/confrontational) and statecraft (cunning) were aligned to achieve these goals, and de Gaulle was relentless in his pursuit. General de Gaulle's objectives were not mutually exclusive pursuits, but linked to each other. Domestic morale was directly related to France's international status and prestige. Any increase in prominence and stature on the international front seemed to boost self esteem amongst the French, giving France a greater sense of dignity. Charles de Gaulle sought grandeur to unite France and give the people a sense of common purpose. According to de Gaulle, France's pursuit of the national interest was not narrow and self-serving, but was in the interest of all humanity; an

agent of peace destined to restore equilibrium to a world suffering under the hegemony of the superpowers.<sup>1</sup>

### **STRATEGY: INDEPENDENCE!**

Charles de Gaulle's roots in France were generations old, reinforcing his belief in the greatness and perpetually ordained place France should occupy on the world stage. A realist, he believed nations, homogeneous peoples, the traditions and cohesion of the nation-state were everything. His political philosophy was shaped by the perspectives of nineteenth century Europe in which nationalism was the only true and lasting force, stronger than any ideology or passing phase of leadership.<sup>2</sup>

Well educated, a WWI combat veteran, a respected military theorist (whose published writings on military tactics and doctrine were required reading for German military officers prior to WWII) and an astute politician, de Gaulle possessed a deep personal and philosophical conviction about his role as both the image and leader of France. Convinced that post WWII France should be an influential and, eventually, a dominant and recognized player (equal to the US) in world politics, de Gaulle executed a strategy emphasizing an independent French state. Independence to de Gaulle meant complete autonomy. Choices in the national interest would be free from external pressures, agendas and desires of other states or multilateral organizations (ie, NATO). According to de Gaulle achieving independence entailed shedding the susceptibility of dependence in any form. This required:

- \* Freedom from Anglo-Saxon domination in military, defense and political policy policymaking/decisions.<sup>3</sup> (NATO Disengagement/Nuclear Weapons Capability Policy)
- \* Reestablishment of French leadership on the European continent. (Euro Alliance Development Policy)
- \* Achieving international recognition of France's importance in the world of nations. (Projection Policy)

More than any others, the above three factors were most critical to de Gaulle's grand strategy. This was true for two reasons. First, WWII had seen France overshadowed by the US, UK and Russia. The war had left France with little influence in Europe and had psychologically and morally weakened the French people. General de Gaulle had forgotten nothing of his wartime dealings with the US/UK, the subsidiary role he had been forced to play and the exclusion of France from all of the central decision-making by the Allies.<sup>4</sup> Second, with the onset and escalation of the Cold War following WWII, there unfolded a bipolar world whose principal players were the US and Soviet Union. Again, France seemed relegated to a supporting actor role subject to influences of US foreign policy regarding the Soviet Union. General de Gaulle recognized Cold War politics as an impairment to France's rise to power in Europe. De Gaulle viewed NATO and SHAPE as the embodiment of the same subjugation to Anglo-Saxon dominance and command that the French had experienced during WWII.<sup>5</sup> The events of WWII and the Cold War synthesized de Gaulle's strategy of independence. It was considered the fundamental aspect of the permanent national interest--the revitalization of France's national identity and the enhancement of France's image in the world.<sup>6</sup>

## **STRATEGY: PLAN AND EXECUTION**

"INDEPENDENCE" was the theme for de Gaulle's strategy. His goal was to instill in other key nations a sense of dependence on France as a way to increase the influence base of the French state. Influence, either perceived or real, meant power. Power represented independence, resulting in greater prestige, recognition and respect by other nation states. General de Gaulle sought to develop and accumulate leverage, which I refer to as "power capital," to minimize the actions/desires of dominant countries that might impact on France's ability to make national interest decisions.<sup>7</sup> Using power capital tactics de Gaulle implemented the policies of NATO Disengagement/Nuclear Weapons Capability, Euro Alliance Development and Projection. These tactics included:

- \* Non cooperation, obstructionism and confrontation regarding Anglo-Saxon initiatives.
- \* Building international coalitions and engaging in bilateral/multilateral cooperations.
- \* National defense autonomy.
- \* Pragmatism in response to world crisis events.

General de Gaulle's deep resentment toward the US/UK stemmed from World Wars I & II where France was reliant upon allies and dominated by their influence. His consistently confrontational and obstructive approach with the US/UK were geared toward reemphasizing France as a unique and self sufficient nation state. Particularly concerning NATO de Gaulle focus his dissension. NATO represented Anglo-Saxon oversight and control of Western Europe, suppressing France's rise to power in

Europe. Employing piecemeal withdrawal, France gradually removed forces from NATO military control. As a member of NATO, de Gaulle's disagreement with Anglo-Saxon policy was highlighted by:

- \* Denying the presence of nuclear weapons on French soil unless under the sole control of the French government.
- \* Retaining a hardline approach toward the Soviet Union concerning Allied rights in Berlin. This was in opposition to the US/UK position of engaging the Soviets in negotiation.
- \* Refusal to join the multilateral nuclear force (MLF).

Confrontation, dissention and obstructiveness served the purpose of distancing France from Anglo-Saxon domination, increasing French credibility in Europe and extending de Gaulle's sphere of influence worldwide. General de Gaulle wanted to send a clear signal to the US/UK of France's desire for equal standing. While disengaging from NATO, de Gaulle was simultaneously asserting the need for a new body consisting of the US, UK and France. This body, the Triumvirate, would have joint decision responsibility on all political matters affecting world security including use of nuclear weapons.<sup>8</sup>

The Triumvirate proposal is one example of de Gaulle's tactic to build international coalitions or engage in bilateral/multilateral cooperations. General de Gaulle viewed alliances as temporary instruments of statecraft where each alliance member should retain maximum freedom to undertake independent actions when its interests diverged from the common interest or the wishes of the most powerful members.<sup>9</sup> The Triumvirate proposal, although not accepted by the US/UK, was a tool for de Gaulle to further distance himself from NATO and gain recognition in power

politics. The Franco-German Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation represented another use of coalition building. Intended by de Gaulle to spur a new political alignment on the continent of Europe, the Franco-German treaty would also serve to tear away at the fabric of NATO. General de Gaulle interpreted his view of coalition building as a means of symbolizing French equality, in terms of political stature, with the superpowers, and as a way to represent French freedom of action in Europe.

National defense autonomy was a key element to de Gaulle strategy. It represented authority recognized by world powers; and it was real rather than an image projected through political maneuvering. To a country with limited resources compared with the US or Soviet Union, nuclear weapons were available and a relatively inexpensive means of acquiring significant leverage within the international security system.<sup>10</sup> Alone, a nuclear capability gave France a strong sense of autonomy, but France's early departure from the UN disarmament talks and refusal to participate in the NATO multilateral nuclear force (MLF) were examples of de Gaulle's exertion of French independence.

General de Gaulle was adept at manipulating a world crisis to the political advantage of France. Two events are representative: The Paris Summit (1960) regarding Berlin and the Cuban Missile crisis (1962). In both de Gaulle stood firm in his belief that Russian leadership was bluffing about intentions to push the Allies into war by instigating "free" Berlin or violating the naval blockade of Cuba respectively. The Paris Summit, consisting of the US, UK, France and the Soviet Union, was unique because it coincided with the shoot down of a US spyplane over Soviet territory. When



the principals gathered in Paris the meeting quickly deteriorated into an awkward situation with Khrushchev demanding official apology from Eisenhower. General de Gaulle's skill in defusing the situation, coupled with his hard line response to Soviet aggression, won him praise and recognition as a diplomat and statesman. In the Cuban situation, de Gaulle, when confronted with concrete intelligence showing nuclear missiles in Cuba, responded with immediate support for and alignment with US actions. But he was convinced there would be no war. His calmness, personal confidence and understanding of Cold War issues gained France additional prestige. In both situations de Gaulle assessed Soviet intentions correctly. France's international stature had improved. In addition de Gaulle's reputation as an arbiter for peace was gaining recognition.

## **CONCLUSION**

Was de Gaulle's strategy effective and did it succeed? Charles de Gaulle, I believe, did have an effective strategy, but it was only partially successful. He was able to restore French national identity, self esteem and dignity; but he did not recapture France's position of grandeur as the central power in Europe or elsewhere. It is my opinion that the de Gaulle's national interest objectives for France and what was good for the French overlapped. General de Gaulle seemed an extension of the French conscious.

The effectiveness of de Gaulle's strategy is linked to his foreign policy philosophy, diplomacy style and statecraft, particularly his ability to set priorities and stick with them. His foreign policy philosophy was predicated on a realist perspective.

Believing that the only legitimate and viable actors in world politics were sovereign states, de Gaulle's strategy of independence seems natural. In defining and achieving his national interests, de Gaulle offset France's limited resources (compared with US/UK/Soviet Union) by maximizing power capital tactics. Perhaps his greatest asset in implementing his strategy was his diplomacy style which stressed conflict and confrontation rather than reconciliation and cooperation.<sup>11</sup> Coupled with his diplomacy style was his cunning statecraft which often involved hidden agendas that only de Gaulle knew of.

Examples include the Triumvirate proposal and the NATO MLF. The Triumvirate was never considered by de Gaulle to be a proposal feasible to the Allies, but it served de Gaulle as a method to emphasize freedom of action and as an excuse to withdraw from NATO. The MLF was a NATO project for strategic nuclear deterrence. The US offered American Polaris missile to the French provided France would join the MLF and assign its submarines to NATO command. In a time when French and Anglo-Saxon/NATO relations were strained, de Gaulle gave the impression to President Kennedy that he would seriously consider the US proposal. Once again, de Gaulle was deliberately sending false signals as part of a plan to openly separate France from NATO and emphasize independent control of her nuclear weapons.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically de Gaulle's diplomacy style and statecraft were also his weakest assets. He failed to instill in other governments a lasting sense of trust.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately the collective effort behind his strategy was not persuasive enough. In light of the

Cold War, de Gaulle was unable to shift European confidence from the US/UK-NATO dominated alliance to a European security coalition inspired by France.

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