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DE GAULLE AND THE ATLANTIC ALLIANCE

CORE COURSE ESSAY

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In 1958 Charles de Gaulle again assumed the leadership of France. It was his third career. As an innovative military officer his prescient theories on the changing nature of war - had they been accepted by the French High Command - could have prevented the French disaster of 1940. His second career immediately followed his first as he assumed leadership of the Free French. By circumstance, persistence and sheer force of personality he built a French military force, secured support from Roosevelt and Churchill, and established a provisional government which liberated Paris and ruled France from 1944 to 1946. In 1946 he resigned over the draft constitution for the Fourth Republic which in his view failed to give adequate power to the executive.

The man who took power in 1958 was often described as arrogant and inflexible, but he was also a man who had reason to believe he had been right when others more numerous and powerful were wrong. He was supremely self-confident and accustomed to achieving his goals even when working from weakness.

He now came to power with a vision of an independent and morally rejuvenated France, one that operated either as a full partner in a tripartite atlantic alliance or as the first among equals in a community of European States independent from the two superpowers.

De Gaulle's World View

The development of de Gaulle's views is best left to his memoirs and historians, but by the time of his appointment as prime minister they were well formed. Considerable agreement seems to exist on the essential elements, and they are worth considering as one reviews the period.¹

The State: The state is the principal organization in international relations. By reason of history, language, culture, and often ethnic unity the state is best organized to reflect and protect the interests of its citizens.

Independence of Action: To maintain legitimacy and perform its necessary function the state must have independence to determine its course of action. As some authors and colleagues of de Gaulle have commented, this did not necessarily require freedom of action. De Gaulle recognized self sufficiency was not always possible, but the decision making bodies of the state

¹Although similar summaries may be found in many sources this section relies primarily on Michael Harrison, The Reluctant Ally (John Hopkins Press, 1981.)

should not be subordinated to supernational authorities.²

The Immutable Character of the State: Over the long term a state's character and therefore its international behavior changes only slowly. America's isolationism was strong despite its protestations to the opposite. Communism was a temporary phenomenon to be seen more in terms of traditional Russian behavior. The rivalry between France and Germany, however, was of long standing and needed to be actively contained.

Alliances: Alliances are acceptable and even desirable when necessary, but they should be discarded when they outlive their usefulness; and in any event should be flexible to allow member states to pursue their national goals.

National Defense: Almost as a corollary to de Gaulle's conception of the state was his view of the nation's armed forces. If the *raison d'être* for the nation state was national defense, then it was natural that the armed forces be controlled by the state.³

France and its Grandeur: France suffered from a 'constant temptation to mediocrity', which could only be relieved with independence of decision making.⁴ The need for grandeur came from a Hobbesian view that 'reputation of power is power; because it drawth with it the adherence of those that need protection.'⁵

The World as He Found It

²In this I find myself closer to Harrison than Don Cook. The latter tends to view de Gaulle interest in independence as an obsession with little subtlety in definition. Don Cook, Charles de Gaulle, A Biography (New York: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1983). Harrison (p. 50) however quotes Courve de Murville, 'independence is not the disregard of realities,' although it precludes 'their passive acceptance and submission of the inevitable.' This view is more in accord with de Gaulle's actual behavior.

³ It is not clear from the sources consulted that de Gaulle ever explicitly acknowledged the danger of the fallacy of composition; that the result of each party acting in his own self interest could lead to a result that went against the interest of all parties both collectively and individually. In practice however his actions were not necessarily in conflict with that realization.

⁴Harrison 50.

⁵Harrison 53.

The World as He Found It

The France de Gaulle inherited was not the France of his vision. He came to power as a result of the Algerian revolution, in a bipolar world dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States. A third power, much weaker than the superpowers but still recognized for its greatness was Great Britain which had closely allied itself with the United States. To the East lay West Germany, recovered from the war economically and rebuilding itself politically.

France - with its weak executive and constantly changing governments - remained weak politically and militarily. It had subordinated its forces to NATO and joined - in fact helped lead - in the formation of the European Common Market whose proponents hoped would develop into a supernational state.

Moving Ahead

De Gaulle's most important work was initially at home. He needed to create a new constitution with a strong executive government that he would head. This he accomplished by the end of 1958. In Algeria he had to deal with the settlers' revolt and the Algerian nationalists. What de Gaulle really thought about Algerian independence when he assumed power is still open to debate. With his attachment to the French grandeur, he probably still hoped to save the French empire. At the same time his view of the state as an historical and cultural whole must have warned him at least intellectually of the difficulties of uniting France with its disparate territories. As it turned out, he opted for self-determination and by 1962 had not only granted Algeria independence but had divested France of most of its colonial empire.

The Atlantic Alliance

In September 1958 de Gaulle wrote Eisenhower and Macmillan proposing a complete revision of the way that global strategic policy was made. In essence he proposed that a tripartite body - American, British and French - be established with 'responsibility of taking joint decisions on all political matters affecting world security, and drawing up, and if necessary putting into action, strategic plans, especially those involving the use of nuclear weapons'.⁶

There is some dispute if de Gaulle's proposal was serious.⁷

⁶Cook 336.

⁷Cook (p. 336) believes De Gaulle assumed it would not be accepted. Harrison (p. 64) is more restrained.

It seems unlikely, however, that De Gaulle believed the Americans would agree to a proposal that would have given France a major role in the decision to use nuclear weapons or that would have undercut its relationships with other NATO members. De Gaulle's intent was to set the stage for eventual French withdrawal from NATO and the creation of an independent nuclear force. The scope of De Gaulle's plans were not recognized at first, by either the Americans or the British, both of whom tried to reach a compromise.

In the meantime de Gaulle was beginning to move France out of NATO. In 1959 de Gaulle announced his fleet would not participate in that year's NATO fleet exercises. Later that year he barred the stationing of nuclear warheads on French soil unless they were under France's complete control. In 1960 France conducted its first nuclear test.

Though it is common to treat de Gaulle's policies of this and later periods as anti-Anglo-Saxon resulting from his treatment by Roosevelt and Churchill during the war, the policies can also be seen in light of his views on the role of the nation's armed forces and self-interest.

NATO forces reported to an American commander and a British deputy commander. The French President was willing to coordinate the use of his forces with NATO should it be necessary, but it was his view that national forces should respond first to their state. Arguments that his actions might hurt the ability of the Atlantic Alliance's to meet potential or actual threats were not lost on de Gaulle and he demonstrated his reliability as an ally several times in the next few years - in opposition to Khrushchev's threats against Berlin, in support of Eisenhower after the U-2 incident and with the US in the Cuban missile crisis. Nevertheless in each of those crisis the French position was decided by France. What mattered was the independence of France and its moral rejuvenation.

De Gaulle's decisions were made easier by his views on changes in the Soviet Union after the death of Stalin. Although he had strongly supported the formation of the Atlantic Alliance and now wished to retain it as a matter of elemental security, he believed that many of the conditions that accompanied its founding had changed. The man who once believed "only the American nuclear shield had saved Europe from invasion, was now, from 1958 onward convinced of the irreducibly peaceful character of the balance of terror."⁸

The Force de Frappe

⁸Jean Lacoutre, De Gaulle the Ruler 1945-1970 (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992) 388.

The creation of the force de frappe was probably a foregone conclusion once de Gaulle regained power. It was a logical outcome of his belief in independence of action and the need for states to act in their own self interest. He could not have believed that France could produce a nuclear arsenal capable of challenging the Soviet Union. He had no need.

However, a minimal French nuclear force was all that was needed to significantly complicate Soviet strategy. De Gaulle could foresee circumstances when America might not wish to risk nuclear confrontation for the interests of France. In such a situation an independent force might be all that be needed to give the Soviet Union pause.

There were other advantages. A nuclear force enhanced a nation's reputation for power (*grandeur*). It was also relatively cheap compared to the conventional forces that would be required to act as an equal deterrent to a non-nuclear threat.

The Americans could provide no substitute, because their proposals - including the Multilateral Force or the Polaris missiles - always had an American hand sharing the trigger.

Expanding the Options

While de Gaulle was working to free France from the grip of NATO he was simultaneously working to build an European alliance - initially with Germany, but perhaps eventually with the rest of Europe. Germany was of course a key to French security. It was the economic heart of Europe and historically a key competitor of France. He moved first to meet with Chancellor Adenauer in 1958 just days before he proposed the tripartite alliance to America and Britain. The first meeting achieved little, partially because de Gaulle failed to tell Adenauer about his tripartite proposal. Efforts at developing a closer relationship continued, however, since de Gaulle saw them as important to French security while Adenauer, near the end of his career, was "devoted to Franco-German reconciliation."⁹

One of the outcomes of the de Gaulle - Adenauer talks was the Fouchet Commission. It met throughout 1961-62 to establish the foundation for European political unity, but failed to reach agreement. The differences were fundamental. De Gaulle wanted a "union of states" whereas most of the six were looking for a supernational state. De Gaulle also wanted to exclude Britain - whom he had already vetoed from EEC membership - on the grounds that it was not sufficiently European. Other states disagreed.

⁹Cook 338.

In 1963 Adenauer and de Gaulle concluded a treaty of cooperation. it came at a bad time just following a de Gaulle press conference where he again vetoed British entry into the EEC and also rejected the American offer of Polaris missiles. In the uproar that followed the German parliament reacted to fears of antagonizing America by adding a preamble "stating that nothing in the treaty superseded West Germany's commitments and obligations under the NATO treaty . . .".¹⁰ De Gaulle rejected the preamble and the treaty slid into oblivion.

Events after 1963 often caused considerable commotion, but the major issues had been decided. France would eventually withdraw completely from NATO although remain a member of the Atlantic Alliance. The force de frappe became a reality. Franco-German relations continued to strengthen, but Germany never loosened her ties with the US. European economic integration continued but political integration stalled. French attempts to open a dialogue with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe were based on a firm understanding of the strength of nationalism, but came twenty years too soon. Franco-American relations continued to have their problems, particularly over French recognition of China and opposition to US involvement in Vietnam. De Gaulle would probably feel that history has confirmed his views on the latter two issues.

The Vision and the Legacy

De Gaulle's attempt to regain France's independence of decision making was largely successful. So was his attempt at restoring French grandeur, especially as it was defined as recreating France's own pride and respect after defeat and occupation.

His success was based on his understanding of the freedom of action France could enjoy in a bipolar world. So long as the Americans believed that keeping France out of Soviet hands was in America's own interest it did not matter if France were an ally or a neutral. If intransigence could help restore French grandeur, then it was valuable.

De Gaulle's vision of creating an European community of states largely separate although still allied with America was not achieved, at least not during his lifetime. It was probably never obtainable, because it violated one of de Gaulle's own tenets on the proper behavior of governments - to act in their own national interest.

France never had the power to offer its European powers the security they could obtain from the Americans. Greater European

¹⁰Cook 365.

integration was desired, but not at the risk of offending the Americans. It was even less desirable when it meant replacing American hegemony with France as first among equals. De Gaulle might have made more progress if he had shown less intransigence with the Anglo-Saxons, but then he would not have been de Gaulle.