

France and NATO

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On 17 September 1958, the French President, General Charles de Gaulle, sent a memorandum to the US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and the British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan. In it, he called for the terms of reference of the Atlantic Alliance to be given a global scale in order, among other things, to cover certain geographical areas where France retained specific interests. He also proposed the creation of a tripartite Directorate of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), whereby France, the United Kingdom and the United States would be put on an equal footing for the purposes of discussing nuclear strategy. In the event of its partners refusing, France, which wished to retain absolute control of its armed forces, reserved the right to withdraw from NATO. Indeed, de Gaulle drew no distinction between NATO and Europe. He sought to take advantage of France's strengthened position in NATO in order to consolidate its influence among the Six on the basis of a Franco-German partnership. On the other hand, he also hoped to develop European political and strategic cooperation in order to pressurise the United States into accepting the French plans for the reform of the Atlantic Alliance.

The United States and the United Kingdom did not accept the French proposals. Consequently, on 11 March 1959, France decided to withdraw its Mediterranean naval fleet from NATO command. In June, it refused to store foreign nuclear weapons on its territory, forcing the United States to transfer 200 military aircraft out of France. In the spring of 1960, the United States and the United Kingdom repeatedly informed the French Government of their refusal to conclude an agreement on nuclear cooperation, particularly on the development of nuclear warheads. France finally concluded that the 'special relationship' between Britain and America was at work and decided to re-focus its efforts on establishing a political Europe. On 21 June 1963, France also withdrew its Atlantic and Channel fleets from NATO command. The rift deepened on 10 March 1966, when General de Gaulle officially announced that France intended to withdraw from the Alliance and demanded that all NATO bases be removed from French territory. SHAPE was relocated from Paris to Brussels. However, France remained a member of the Atlantic Pact and of NATO.