

‘De Gaulle and the nuclear key’ from the Süddeutsche Zeitung (10 July 1959)


Caption: On 10 July 1959, the German daily newspaper Süddeutsche Zeitung considers General de Gaulle’s military nuclear policy and outlines the stormy nature of Franco-American relations in the area of defence.

Source: Süddeutsche Zeitung. Münchner Neueste Nachrichten aus Politik, Kultur, Wirtschaft und Sport. Hrsg. Friedmann, Werner; Goldschagg, Edmund; Schöningh, Dr. Franz Josef; Schwingenstein, August ; R Herausgeber Friedmann, Werner. 10.07.1959, Nr. 164; 15. Jg. München: Süddeutscher Verlag. "De Gaulle und der Atomschlüssel", auteur:Fackler, Maxim , p. 1.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/de_gaulle_and_the_nuclear_key_from_the_suddeutsche_zeitung_10_july_1959-en-4232370e-35d1-4614-bfd1-154fae67a52d.html

Last updated: 06/07/2016



De Gaulle and the nuclear key

By Maxim Fackler

The 200 American jet fighter-bombers, based in France as an instrument of NATO, will now, after all, be transferred to Great Britain and the German Federal Republic because Charles de Gaulle is not prepared to recognise America's exclusive to use nuclear warheads, the nuclear warheads, that is, which the bombers would use in an emergency against an aggressor. France wanted the right to control the storage and the use of the bombs: it wanted that second key to Pandora's box which, to date, America has handed only to Great Britain for the launch of medium-range missiles. These missiles, whose launch pads are based in eastern England, may be despatched to their target only if both an American and a British officer turn their key in the ignition lock, comparable to the mechanism of bank safes with special valuables which can also only be opened with two passwords. Britain received the second key because it is a nuclear power. France is not — or not yet.

From a *military* point of view, the incident of the 200 jet fighter-bombers is not terribly significant. They belong to two Allied tactical air wings which have their headquarters in the Palatinate and near Mönchengladbach and make up about one tenth of their power. Two hundred of these aircraft are about the equivalent of the German Federal Republic's four fighter wings. By transferring them to England and the Federal Republic, NATO does not lose them for tactical use. Fighter-bombers with a limited range are used for instant defence and not for massive retaliation with very heavy calibre bombs. NATO does not even have such calibres at its direct disposal, but only indirectly through the United States' strategic bomber commands, stationed throughout the world, and through British-produced hydrogen bombs.

The *political* aspect of the French obstinacy not to let America fully control the tactical fighters from French territory is far more inconvenient than the military consequences. NATO is divided; it is not as free from lurking mistrust as a Defence Community should be. France is haunted by the doubt that it is not sufficiently respected and worries about whether the nuclear powers are taking life-and-death decisions over its head. And who would not be worried about this? But the tactical fighters do not really constitute the best scenario for demonstrating such fears, given that these aircraft are actually under the control of the NATO Central Europe Command whose head is, after all, the French General Valluy. According to NATO's command structure, an American squadron commander cannot even take off without due authorisation. The fact that France nevertheless continues to be so obstinate reveals a deeper-seated resentment on the part of General de Gaulle.

From the bottom of his heart, de Gaulle bears a grudge against fate for not yet letting France become a nuclear power. Although nuclear science is blooming, the thousands of millions required for the tests have not been available — millions of dollars, that is, not francs. De Gaulle has entered the race that had already started before he arrived: to manufacture the bomb before the current three nuclear powers conclude an agreement to reduce the danger of Armageddon. There is, of course, no saying whether the Soviet Union might one day be tempted to help the People's Republic of China to enter the 'nuclear club'; America and Great Britain, at all events, do not wish for an increase in the membership. They do not share France's point of view that French nuclear weapons would strengthen Europe's security. That is why they are not offering de Gaulle any support; the great French test explosion in the Sahara will have to wait.

Nobody had expected de Gaulle to do anything other than, in silent modesty, to make France change her course of inner confusions and lead her along the path of recovery and new strength. Both the British and the Americans had their share of wartime experiences with the General who kept on saying that he, and he alone, was France. Twenty years older, President de Gaulle has acquired new features, some even quite surprising, but he is still as convinced as ever that the 'Tricolore' will always have to fly in the front row. France's reputation has grown under de Gaulle, but his demands have become loud even more rapidly. The Allies are, therefore, torn between respect and annoyance. The London *Times* observes that, with his continued refusal (to store American nuclear warheads in France), de Gaulle is putting up for discussion what is, for him, the most important issue: a greater say for France in the global strategy of the West. Americans and Britons are looking with some uneasiness towards autumn — when France's first hydrogen

bomb might in actual fact be tested and it would no longer be necessary for de Gaulle to ask for a second key.