‘De Gaulle and NATO' from the Corriere della Sera (25 February 1966)

Caption: On 25 February 1966, the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera considers the causes and possible consequences of a withdrawal of French military forces from the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation's command structure.

Source: Corriere della Sera. 25.02.1966, n° 47; anno 91. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "De Gaulle e la NATO", auteur:Guerriero, Augusto , p. 1.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/de_gaulle_and_nato_from_the_corriere_della_sera_25_february_1966-en-cfd9ae25-308f-4a67-b855-ec6a53793711.html

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De Gaulle and NATO

What does de Gaulle want? The end of the Alliance? Reform of the military command? Replacement of the Alliance by a series of bilateral agreements?

His speech on the subject of NATO can be divided into three parts. An introduction, a rather confused summary of his position and intentions. A middle part, the largest section setting out his arguments. A third section, the conclusion, which appears to be a clearer statement of intentions.

Part One: 'The Treaty, the Alliance, no longer meets the changing conditions.' True, perhaps. But in what respect? He doesn't say. The Alliance needs to be 'adapted' to the new conditions. 'Reformed', then, not 'scrapped.' Indeed, he stresses that 'France considers the Alliance "still" useful for its security and that of the West.' So he doesn't want it ended. But for what reason? Why is it 'still' useful? And for how long will it 'still' be useful? He doesn't say. In fact, de Gaulle is using the word 'still' to keep his options open. When the Treaty expires, he will decide whether the Alliance is still useful or serves no further purpose. If his demands have been met in the meantime, he will probably conclude that the Alliance is useful. If they have been rejected, the Alliance will be deemed to be of no use.

However, says de Gaulle, France is not happy with the implementing arrangements, which were adopted after the pact. Does he want the implementing arrangements revised? It would seem so.

In his conclusion, de Gaulle makes a clear distinction between two periods: the period up to the expiry date of the Treaty on 4 April 1969, and the ensuing period. We must accept that distinction if we are to follow his argument. What does he intend to do during the first period? To respect the Treaty that France signed: no more and no less. But during that same period, i.e. as long as the Treaty is in force, France will continue to adjust the provisions concerning it. In other words, de Gaulle is saying: just as we have withdrawn the warships we placed at NATO's disposal, so we shall withdraw our officials from SHAPE, our two divisions from Germany, and our aircraft from the Allied air force. In short, France will cease military cooperation with the Allies. So what is the meaning of the statement that France 'is not turning its back on membership of the Atlantic Alliance'? An alliance is not a declaration of abstract principles that allows you to say: I adhere to the principles, but I shall not work together with you. An alliance is, precisely, an obligation to cooperate in joint defence. To say 'I adhere to the Alliance but I shall not cooperate' is a contradiction in terms. It is like saying 'I shall honour my debt but I won't pay up.'

That is what France intends for the first period, up to expiry of the Treaty. What will it do afterwards? 'It will be prepared … to make such arrangements for practical cooperation with one or other of its allies as may appear useful to both parties.' In other words, France 'will be prepared' to conclude bilateral agreements. And de Gaulle goes straight on to say: 'The overall aim is to restore a normal situation of sovereignty in which what is French, in terms of land, sea, air and armed forces, as well as any foreign element on French territory, shall in future be subject only to French authority. This is a necessary adaptation, not a break.'

I believe this must be interpreted as follows: if the Americans agree to place their whole military apparatus in France — troops, arms, bases, etc. — under French command, we shall conclude that the Alliance has been 'adapted' to the new conditions and shall not withdraw from it.

Let us now step back and examine the grounds on which de Gaulle justifies this programme.

He puts forward three arguments. The first is that developments in Russia mean the West is no longer under the threat it faced when the American 'protectorate' was set in place in Europe via NATO.

Apart from the fact that what we have is 'protection', not a 'protectorate', we may object that the threat of aggression has diminished but has not disappeared. Rather, it has changed its nature. For some members of the Alliance — Greece and Turkey — it has become a threat of internal subversion. However, de Gaulle is caught up in two contradictions. Number one: if a threat no longer exists, the Alliance is useless.

Nevertheless, he says he wants ‘adaptation’, not a break. And the adaptation in question would consist in putting the American forces in France under French command. So if those forces are under American command, the Alliance does not meet the new conditions; if they are under French command, it does.

Contradiction number two: if the danger has passed and the Alliance is no longer of any use, what purpose would be served by the bilateral agreements that de Gaulle proposes for the period after 4 April 1969? Let us assume that France and Germany conclude a bilateral agreement. To what end? In order to defend themselves. But you can’t have it both ways: either defence is necessary, in which case NATO, which provides defence, should continue; or there is no need for defence, in which case a bilateral agreement will serve no purpose.-

The second argument is that the US nuclear guarantee to Europe ceased to be ‘credible’ when the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons. It is a subject on which the General has written a great deal. The whole Gaullist critique of the Atlantic Alliance and America’s guarantee to Europe is based on the elementary psychological premise that no one is prepared to be killed defending his friend or ally.

But, here again, de Gaulle contradicts himself. ‘The conviction that America would use its nuclear weapons in the event of aggression has been weakened.’ Fine. But what should Europe do? Discard the US guarantee? And replace it by what? Either by nothing or by a French guarantee (i.e. bilateral agreements). In the first case, Europe would be left without defence. And it does not want to be defenceless. In the second case, it remains to be explained why a French nuclear guarantee would be more ‘credible’ than the American variety: for it to be ‘credible’, France would have to assume the deadly risk that America is allegedly not prepared to assume.

The truth of the matter is this: de Gaulle is asking the countries of Europe to give up the US guarantee in exchange for a bluff (a French guarantee in the form of bilateral agreements), since he is convinced that his bluff will not be called, i.e. the Russians will not attack. He has said as much himself: ‘The West is no longer threatened.’

The third argument is that America, which intervenes in other parts of the world outside Europe — Korea, Cuba, Vietnam — may be drawn into a general conflagration in which Europe would be automatically involved.

That is not true. Europe could always stay out of it. In any case, de Gaulle once again contradicts himself. When the Cuban crisis broke out, he declared full and unconditional solidarity with America — solidarity that was completely unsolicited. And now he is afraid of being drawn in.

Conclusion. Perhaps we may now venture a conjecture or, rather, a suspicion? De Gaulle’s France will remain in the Alliance if it is granted a very prominent position tantamount to European leadership status. If not, we shall just have to do without it.

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