

Address given by Georges Pompidou to the French National Assembly (13 April 1966)

Caption: In an address to the French National Assembly on 13 April 1966, Georges Pompidou, French Prime Minister, explains the reasons behind the unilateral withdrawal of French troops from the integrated military command of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

Source: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee: A retrospective view of the political year in Europe 1966. March 1967. Paris: Western European Union Assembly-General Affairs Committee.

Copyright: (c) WEU Secretariat General - Secrétariat Général UEO

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_georges_pompidou_to_the_french_national_assembly_13_april_1966-en-1cc55b75-80af-4fe5-9e5d-8960923c55f4.html

Publication date: 25/10/2012

Speech by Georges Pompidou to the French National Assembly (13 April 1966)

[...]

This leads me to the third event which has arisen since the end of your last session, and that is France's decision to withdraw from NATO and to resume full sovereignty over its territory and air space.

In this connection many people have expressed surprise and pretended to believe it was a sudden and unexpected decision. In reality, for years we have continuously proclaimed our allegiance to the Atlantic Alliance, that is to say the Treaty of April 1949, and also that we wished to re-examine the integrated military structure which had been grafted on it.

The conversations we have been holding with our European and American partners for some years have convinced us that, far from wishing the organisation to be changed in accordance with our views, they wish to maintain the existing organisation, or go further in the same direction.

That is why we decided, for want of a better solution, to act on our own, our views having been explained on various occasions, to the representatives of the United States and the Secretary-General of NATO, and the President of the Republic having frequently made our intentions clear, in particular in his press conference last February. In doing this, we have always stressed that we had no intention of questioning the Alliance, which we consider essential as long as there is a possibility of our security and that of our allies being threatened.

Negotiations have started. Our fourteen partners in the Alliance have, with slight variations, signified their preference for maintaining the organisation. We are not surprised. We are prepared for discussions, particularly with the United States and Germany, regarding practical arrangements for transferring headquarters, evacuating American bases or maintaining French troops in Germany. We are prepared to negotiate agreements on facilities which might be granted to the allies and making provision for the participation of French troops in joint action in the event of hostilities within the framework of the Alliance.

But we must draw a lesson from the way in which the international situation has evolved since the 1950s.

Immediately after the last war, Western Europe no longer existed, either militarily or economically. With the threat of Stalinist Russia hanging over it, Europe's only guarantee, its only hope, lay in American nuclear strength.

NATO, above all the integration of command under the authority of an American general with the dual rôle of Commander-in-Chief of allied forces and Commander-in-Chief of the American troops - responsible in this latter capacity only to the President of the United States, particularly for the use of nuclear weapons - enabled Europe to be placed under American protection. I am not criticising, I am merely stating facts.

... Since then the situation has changed completely. The fact that Russia has an enormous nuclear arsenal has changed the balance of forces between Russia and the United States.

European economic revival and France's conquest of the nuclear weapon have similarly changed the balance in the Atlantic Alliance. The evolution of Soviet Russia since the Cuban crisis, its concern about the growth of China and the increasing opposition between American and Chinese policies in Asia have also altered the situation. The threat to Western Europe has diminished. Asia has taken Europe's place as an area of encounter between the powers.

Within NATO itself, we have seen the initial strategy, based on deterrence and consequently an immediate nuclear response, progressively replaced, without our agreement, by the so-called flexible response strategy which, on the pretext of reducing the risk of total war, enables the United States to limit the field of initial operations while sparing the territory of whoever might be the main aggressor.

Such a method is unsatisfactory as it is fraught with dangers for France.

To say the least, the Alliance's conventional forces, the only ones to be integrated, could not be certain of halting an attack from the East, even if supplied with tactical nuclear weapons whose use would still be subject to American command.

Such a strategy involves the risk of nuclear bombing first, and invasion next. It keeps the integrated headquarters busy preparing the most out-of-date kind of operations in which we might well be the losers. Is this not the same mistake as Wilhelm II made in 1914 and Hitler in 1939, i.e. of imagining that a European war can be localised and that once the immediate aims have been achieved an arrangement can be reached and the conflict stopped?

... It makes us consider possible liberation by American nuclear weapons, in which case what might survive the first stage would certainly be annihilated.

The links involved in integration can also lead us into a war not of our making which might break out outside the North Atlantic Treaty area for reasons of no concern to the interests of France and the Alliance.

Finally, insofar as integration means setting up a collective war machine in peacetime, it goes hand in hand with the cold war and helps to perpetuate it.

To these concepts, which correspond neither to the needs of modern warfare nor to French interests and dignity, we oppose our own : an alliance entered into freely, agreements enabling it to be applied fully immediately there is aggression and providing for co-operation between all allied armies, including our own, and above all the organisation not of war but of deterrence, which alone can save humanity from irreparable disaster, and in which we for our part would co-operate with our own nuclear force.

... By our action we consider we are serving the cause of peace and defending the Alliance's true interests, just as we did without hesitation at the time of the Cuban crisis when we informed the President of the United States that France would be at its side in the event of conflict, even though Cuba was not covered by the North Atlantic Treaty.

Good allies are not the most docile. Free and sovereign nations are the only ones which can consider fighting.

We are not trying to bring France back to obsolete nationalist concepts, we are merely giving it back the right to decide on its own course. Independence does not destroy solidarity, it strengthens it, or perhaps even creates it.

France must be returned to itself. Thus we are serving Europe and preparing the re-emergence of Europe so that it can play its part.

Do not imagine that we are changing sides. We are against hegemony and so do not intend to favour Soviet hegemony, nor does our attitude towards the war in Vietnam encourage Chinese hegemony in that part of the world.

Those, Ladies and Gentlemen, are the reasons for our action in this important matter. They change nothing in our feelings towards the American people and the importance of the interests which unite us with the United States. I am convinced the day will come when America will understand us and do justice to General de Gaulle as the perspicacious leader of its oldest and most faithful ally.

In my speech I have kept to general facts. If, as I think, it proves during this debate that the Assembly attaches special importance to this problem, I shall ask the Minister for Foreign Affairs to give you any additional explanations you may require, reserving the right to reply myself to the speakers at the end of the debate.

But I do not wish to end without saying a few words about the effects our attitude to NATO may have on our relations with the Federal Republic of Germany.

Admittedly, and understandably, Germany's position is not the same as ours, on the one hand because of its past and on the other because it is now cut in two and even in three, and is directly exposed to a threat from the East. It is therefore normal for its reactions not to be the same.

But to those who spread alarm about German nationalism, I shall first say that for us the Germany of today is not the Germany of 1930. The reconciliation, confirmed by the Treaty of January 1963, put an end to a long quarrel. We know the German leaders and have confidence in their wish for peace. Besides, if there are fears in this field, is it not because of Germany's direct or indirect access to nuclear power, for which France is not responsible?

It is true that the maintenance of French forces in Germany raises a question. It can and will be solved if Germany so desires, just as it was not because of us that Franco-German military co-operation was not more active and more effective. But - and we have told the German leaders so frankly on many occasions - the only solution to the great problem of reunification, which is essential to Germany, resides in a resolutely peaceful policy and the improvement of relations with Russia. That is why the visit to Moscow should not cause the Federal Government anxiety, since it serves its interests as well as those of peace in Europe.

The word peace has come up frequently during this speech, because it is the real keyword of our foreign policy. The alarming power of modern weapons makes it impossible for responsible men to consider having recourse to war. The aim of national defence is no longer to win wars but to make them impossible. In the absence of real controlled disarmament, which we for our part are willing to accept, peace requires all countries, whatever the balance of forces, to agree to respect the independence of the others, to undertake to solve differences only by negotiation, to devote their efforts to the elimination of tension and the establishment of closer links, so that finally there can be agreement between the more fortunate nations to help the development of those nations which are in want. For there can be no lasting peace as long as misery rubs shoulders with wealth and the weak are under the thumb of the powerful, any more than there can be internal peace if there is no moral and material equality of social conditions.

... The aims of such a policy are difficult.

But do not be mistaken, they are the only realistic ones now that mankind has become aware of its dignity.

In this perilous world where the great countries' eternal and inevitable desire for power disposes of incalculable means, a voice must be raised to claim the right for nations, however weak they may be, to answer for themselves and decide their destinies. This is France's rôle today. Its wisdom and history dictate it, and its place among the nations and the international prestige of the President of the Republic enable it to carry out this rôle.

Admittedly, there are drawbacks in assuming this rôle. But France would be failing itself and disappointing the hopes of mankind if it shirked this task.

[...]