

## Address given by René Pleven to the French National Assembly (14 April 1966)

**Caption:** In an address to the French National Assembly on 14 April 1966, René Pleven, former French Defence Minister, criticises President de Gaulle's decision to withdraw French troops from NATO's integrated military command and indicates the dangers of this unilateral decision for the security of Europe.

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[...]

Your unwonted haste and the short time limits you laid down show that you had but one aim in mind: to take an irreversible, i.e. for us irreparable, step, as quickly as possible.

The bilateral or even multilateral conventions you propose are merely intended to settle arrangements for the departure of our allies, the status of our forces in Germany and the thousand and one questions of detail raised by the liquidation of seventeen years of joint life and work.

But you did not propose, as you promised here, to discuss the important problems which should have been the subject of the negotiations you told us you wished to hold before taking any action. You misled us concerning your intentions and you did not inform the nation.

The method used, which is detestable towards our Atlantic allies, is just as open to criticism in the framework of East-West relations as a whole, between those whom I must apologise for continuing to call the communist world and the free world.

All of a sudden, without any negotiations, and without asking for anything in exchange, the French Government has just made the USSR a present fit for a king: it has turned American troops out of France.

For years, in all East-West negotiations, there has always been the question of the simultaneous withdrawal of Soviet and American troops. In all the arguments both for and against disengagement there has at least been agreement on one point: that if there was to be disengagement it should be simultaneous, reciprocal and balanced.

And now, off its own bat, without consulting its allies, breaking away from western solidarity without which there can be no hope of security, the Government takes steps to make the American and Canadian forces leave French territory, i.e. an essential part of the strategic system and of the lines of communication.

Our friends will leave without anything being negotiated with the Russians, without any Russian troops leaving the smallest strip of those territories where they are hardly wanted, be it in Poland or in Hungary.

The Americans will now be able to rely only on Antwerp or Amsterdam for unloading supplies. La Rochelle, Saint-Nazaire and other ports will be closed to them, but the Russians will continue to have the same facilities as before for bringing troops and equipment into East Germany.

What have we obtained or even tried to obtain from the East?

We are weakening NATO, but is the Warsaw Pact being weakened? To add to this, a few days ago, in Moscow, speaking at the twenty-third congress, Mr. Brejnev, openly contradicting his Ambassador in France, Mr. Zorin, declared: "We are going to strengthen our military co-operation still more, in particular the Warsaw Pact defence system, so as to be able to face any imperialist aggression. All the socialist countries are now grouped together in a single bloc and are ready to strike a decisive blow at any aggressor, whoever he may be."

... With the President of the Republic's journey to Moscow only a few weeks away, the French Government could have said to the Russians: "If France asks the Americans to withdraw from its territory, what will you offer in exchange? Are you prepared to evacuate Hungary or Poland?" Such language would have been understood everywhere, even in Moscow, and certainly by the Hungarians and the Poles.

So the Americans are going to leave France, but ten years after Poznan and ten years after Budapest the Russians are showing no signs of moving.

This is indeed strange diplomacy, but diplomacy, I admit, which is logical in itself, since it refuses to negotiate either with its allies or with, I will not say the enemy, but rather the other side. The result is that the France which will be going to Moscow in June will not be a stronger France but a weaker France. It will have played its card already, and for nothing.

Having said what we think of the method adopted, I must now tell you what we think of the root of the matter.

In support of its decision, the French Government invokes two main arguments, the first of which is that the Soviet threat has receded. I will gladly admit — for it is obvious — that things have changed in the East, and this is welcome news, but I wish to remind you of what the Head of State said in Strasbourg in 1961, referring to the danger hanging over the West. He said: “Confronted with this danger, there is no better solution for France than unity, and, for the countries of the free world, solidarity. Without this unity and without this solidarity lightning would soon strike.”

What has happened then since 1961 to make some of your weekend speakers so certain that the West is no longer in danger of being struck by lightning?

For our part, we note that since 1961 there have been the Berlin and Cuba crises, the disappearance of Mr. Khrushchev almost by magic and the resumption of the communist offensive in Indochina. During the period following the twenty-third congress, just as before, we note that there is very little democracy in the USSR and that surprises and sudden reversals are consequently still possible. We note that no progress has been made in the disarmament negotiations and that Germany is still split in two by the wall of shame.

But even if the cold war is less virulent and the threat seems, in spite of everything, to have lessened, is it possible to say, as the Prime Minister said yesterday, that NATO is helping to perpetuate it? We believe just the opposite and that NATO has made an important contribution to the relaxation of tension.

Contrary to the gloomy warnings which I heard so often before the Atlantic Pact was ratified, the two blocs have not led to war. Their balance has ensured peace. The Soviets have had to mark time.

Be careful that the balance is not upset by weakening just one of the two blocs. Be careful not to awaken new hopes in Moscow and not to encourage a tougher trend.

In fact, instead of exaggerating certain signs of relaxation of tension in order to justify your actions, I believe it would have been more honest to have said: “We have chosen to act now because this seems the most appropriate time to withdraw from a system with which we have never been in agreement.”

To justify its denunciation of NATO, the Government affirms — and this is its second argument — that the facilities granted to our allies on French territory or even partial integration of the Atlantic forces might draw our country into a conflict which might not concern it and would be incompatible with the independence of France.

On the first point, for several weeks your spokesmen have been repeating that “the danger no longer lies in Europe but in Asia. Because of Vietnam, the Americans are risking a war with China which might lead to an outbreak of general hostilities between the USSR and the United States. It is therefore necessary to avoid Europe being involved.” But you know quite well that Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty leaves each government entirely free to reach its decisions and that the decisions which have to be taken at the various stages of alert in NATO would be taken by the member governments of the Alliance with full sovereignty.

Besides, even if a war did break out in Asia between China and America, why would NATO be involved, when the Treaty area covers only Europe and the North Atlantic? Was NATO drawn into the Korean war? And when we ourselves were fighting in Indochina, there was no question of NATO being involved.

And since you never stop repeating that nuclear weapons can be used only as a deterrent, that since Russia

has nuclear weapons capable of striking directly at the United States, the Americans will no longer use such weapons to help their allies, how can you at one and the same time claim that through fear of retaliation the United States would not use nuclear means to protect Europe but might use them to defend South Vietnam or to attack China?

... As for the assertion that where American bases in France are concerned French sovereignty has not been safeguarded, we must remove from this debate incorrect allegations which have been spread to mislead public opinion.

For example, I was surprised to read that a Minister — whom I know to be sincere but who was probably not fully documented — had declared that in the event of armed conflict between the USSR and the United States in Asia, France would be exposed to Russian nuclear attacks because, unable to exercise full sovereignty over the bases used by the United States Air Force on its territory, it would not be able to guarantee that such bases would not be used for operations against Russia.

This is not true. The ministers who preceded you, the servants of the State, in the military or diplomatic service who negotiated on behalf of France at the time, were always just as attached to national sovereignty as you, Gentlemen.

Under the Agreement of 4th October 1952, a French detachment is stationed on all the American air bases. Jointly with the American commander, the French officer commanding this detachment controls access to all the installations on the base. No area is closed to him.

Apart from operational missions for NATO purposes — and as long as there is peace in the treaty area, there are none — operations from airfields in France can be undertaken only after agreement between the two governments.

In an exchange of letters on 4th October 1952, the American Government gave a formal undertaking not to introduce non-conventional weapons into the bases or installations made available by France without consultation and prior agreement of the French Government.

Besides, under an agreement concluded between Mr. Bidault and Mr. Dulles on 8th April 1954, the United States Government recognised, and I quote: “that the use of bases and installations placed at the disposal of the United States Government in France will, in the event of a crisis, be subject to a joint decision by the United States and France, in the light of the circumstances at that time”.

This clause is similar to the one used in like agreements between Britain and the United States. In application of these provisions, and contrary to what has been said, America duly requested authorisation for their flights to the Congo from bases in France at the time of the United Nations operation. It was, I believe, your government, Mr. Prime Minister, which granted this authorisation.

As for the agreement of 8th December 1958 on the organisation of communications and American army depots in France, the text of which had been prepared before 13th May 1958, it was in fact the present Minister for Foreign Affairs who signed it. He therefore did not consider it a threat to the exercise of French sovereignty. All he did was add a denunciation clause divided into two one-year periods, which I regret to say today was not respected, any more than the agreement of 27th February 1951 on the aeronautical equipment depot or that of 4th October 1952 on air bases, or that of 30th June 1953 on the oil pipeline, all of which were to have lasted as long as the Atlantic Pact, unless denounced by mutual consent.

I shall now consider what this famous Atlantic integration is, which you say is so against our sovereignty, so dangerous for our security, so liable to drag us into a conflict we do not want, as if, I would add in passing, there could be conflicts which we do want!

It consists of an allied command in Europe, known as SACEUR, depending on a Standing Group which is the only body of the Pact formed of representatives of only three powers: France, Britain and the United

States.

The Standing Group is responsible to a Military Committee which is under the supreme body, the North Atlantic Council, where all decisions, according to a rule which ought to have pleased you, are taken unanimously.

In other words, the Supreme Command in Europe receives its orders from the Council where each member of the Alliance has a right of veto.

As for its peacetime powers and duties, the Supreme Command on the one hand is responsible for preparing defence plans, which are drawn up on the basis of what is generally known as the “strategic concept”, which must in turn be approved by the Council.

On the other hand, with regard to forces and staff, integration exists only in certain headquarters, and those which concern us most directly are SACEUR and the Fontainebleau headquarters for the army, whose commander is traditionally French.

As for the units assigned to NATO command, that is to say, in the case of France, mainly land and air forces stationed in Germany, the powers of the Supreme Commander in peacetime cover only their training, which boils down to periodic interallied manoeuvres insofar as the governments agree to their forces taking part in them.

In peacetime, the Supreme Commander cannot move a single man or weapon against the will of a member State.

Since NATO was set up, I do not think any French soldier among our forces stationed in Germany has ever had the impression that he was receiving orders from Washington. I think, on the contrary, that the predominant feeling has always been that in Germany it was not the Europeans who were there on behalf of the Americans but the Americans who were there on behalf of the Europeans.

In addition, the existence of the Atlantic Supreme Command enabled the very delicate problem of the German contribution to western defence to be solved after the failure of the EDC.

In this connection, the Paris Agreements of October 1954 form a whole. They make provision for the assignment to the Supreme Command of the forces of the three former occupying powers remaining in Germany, the subordination of German forces to this Command, the fixing of their level, the renunciation of the manufacture of nuclear weapons by the Federal Republic and the presence of British divisions on the continent.

By withdrawing its forces in Germany from Atlantic command, the French Government is upsetting the balance of the agreements. It is authorising our WEU allies to re-examine their own undertakings. It is confronting the German Government with the difficult problem of the status of our forces in Federal Germany.

But there is something still more serious. In a recent interview on television, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, after speaking ironically about armchair strategists, stated: “The nuclear weapon has nothing to do with the Atlantic organisation and nothing to do with the international or integrated command. The nuclear weapon is, in itself, national, and there is no prospect of this changing.”

Having always voted the credits for which you asked so that France can have this weapon, I think I am entitled to remind the Minister for Foreign Affairs that those who are not armchair strategists, those whom the Government makes responsible for the care and management of the strike force, would tell him that the possibility of using it and even its security depend on a distant early warning radar system which has taken years to build and which has cost the fifteen nations of the Alliance tens of millions of new francs.

This warning system is necessarily integrated, and stretches from Norway to Turkey. All the information it collects converges on installations now situated in France. It is essential for allowing the necessary decisions to be taken in the short time available in the event of hostilities. Without such a system, there is no valid air defence, either in the framework of NATO or in the national framework, where our means will, for an indefinite period, be insufficient, due to lack of credits, and ineffective, for lack of space geographically. Without such a system, the French strategic force, which is completely dependent on it, would, I repeat, be blind and deaf and exposed to destruction on the ground before it could take to the air for its own protection.

Without a detection and warning network, what purpose will the tens of millions spent on the strategic nuclear force serve?

What will be the use of the underground silos which we are digging at great expense to house the missiles which are intended to enable us to avoid a break in continuity between the Mirage IV, which will be obsolete in a few years' time, and the delivery vehicles of the future and the nuclear submarines which will not be commissioned for a long time to come?

I am not giving away any secrets, for the press has visited it, if I recall that the Taverny Command Post is completely dependent on information supplied to it by the NATO computers which process in a matter of minutes the data collected by the NATO radar detection network, which is in a state of alert twenty-four hours a day from the North Cape to Anatolia.

This network is the keystone of our nuclear defence, as it is for all our allies.

Are you going to dismantle it on your own initiative? And if you are counting on an agreement with our allies so that it may still be used by us when its brain has left France, what becomes of your claim for independent defence owing nothing to anyone?

I ask the Government not to shirk answering the question I am going to put to it.

Before confirming the decisions taken in these fields, which might be so fraught with consequences, were the responsible French military authorities consulted or not?

I ask the Prime Minister this question, as he is responsible for the defence of the country under Article 21 of the Constitution.

I assert that you rushed into the dismantling of NATO and the demolition of its structure with singular haste, without having determined in advance its exact repercussions either for our own security or — and this is perhaps morally worse — for the security of some of our allies.

It would seem that you, who so often accuse your critics of being carried away by some mystical idea of integration, have been carried away by another mystical idea, that of absolute national independence.

... But, I repeat, although integration does not solve all the problems, still fewer are solved by total national independence, especially in matters of defence and security. It does not even provide a solution for the United States. How could it do so for France? For although it is true that France now has the means to start a nuclear war, you know quite well that it does not have the means to finish one!

The Minister for Foreign Affairs explained last week to the rather surprised listeners of Europe No. 1 that to make French, British, American and other officers and generals work together on studies and plans that they might have to carry out together was to move towards the loss of our independence! He told us that a country which does not feel responsible for its own defence in peacetime loses its military personality.

Allow me to reply that in 1966 nothing and no-one will make the French people believe that, even with a strike force, it can ensure its security against aggression from the East by itself.

No propaganda will make the soldier, airman or sailor of 1966 believe that, whatever his worth, patriotism or training may be, he could protect the national territory alone, whatever weapons he may have.

Both regular and enlisted soldiers are twenty-five years ahead of your concepts.

Combined exercises, the joint effort shoulder to shoulder, the feeling of belonging to a great whole where everyone plays his part with the support of the most powerful arsenals in the world, gave our forces the assurance that in the event of aggression chances would at least be equal.

You will not convince them — and their morale has already been affected — that after withdrawing from NATO they will be better equipped, better commanded and, in short, better able to protect their country.

The feelings of the nation will not be long in catching up with those of the army, and as no-one will underestimate you by thinking that you did not realise what you were doing, the nation will soon be saying that if you have started down the path you want us to follow, it is because you are still counting on NATO protection anyway in the event of aggression from the East, thanks to the fourteen other countries who are still members of NATO.

That feeling — and you know quite well that a number of those who applaud you hold this view — is much more dangerous for the national defence spirit than the participation of French officers in multinational headquarters.

We for our part refuse to stop being full members of the Atlantic Alliance, and to be no longer able to exercise a leading influence.

We cannot have the Atlantic Council leave Paris for London, as the British Government has apparently just proposed, particularly since the place in NATO left empty by France will be occupied by others and the German problem will lose none of its acuteness, quite the contrary.

Instead of pursuing a negative policy, irritating all our allies and causing further difficulties for all and above all for itself, the French Government could have taken steps which we would have supported.

When Mr. Couve de Murville stated, on behalf of the Government, last October, that in all reason it was necessary to discuss the reorganisation of NATO, we thought he would make an effort to solve the real problems raised by the changes which had occurred since 1949.

Like Mr. de la Malène, I see two main problems.

The first is a result of the change in the balance of forces between Europe and America. The free Europe of 1966 bears no comparison with the Europe which was emerging from the ruins in 1949. We all agree about that. Europe wishes to become an equal partner of the United States, what President Kennedy called the “second pillar of western security”. Logically, this has repercussions on the command structure.

In this field, certain changes could have been suggested to our allies, and in particular our American allies. Just as in the Common Market agreement has just been reached on a rotating presidency for the single European Commission, an arrangement could have been made, to start with, for the Commander-in-Chief in Europe to be American or European on a rotational basis, and later for the European Command to be always held by a European, unless a decision to the contrary were reached and formally agreed to by the European members of NATO.

... The second fundamental change results from facts which no-one can contest.

On the one hand, America has become vulnerable to Russian nuclear attack. On the other hand, even if their forces are at very different levels, there are now three nuclear powers in the Alliance, of which two are European.

The problem of European security is thus different from what it was in 1949 and I deplore both the attitude taken by our American friends in the face of these changes and that which you yourself have taken.

Because Russia could now reach American territory with its nuclear missiles, you professed that the United States would not risk nuclear retaliation against an aggressor of France or its neighbours on the European continent.

You have stated that the guarantees of security which a nation, however powerful, could give other nations would now be illusory if that nation were exposed to nuclear retaliation and that we had to rely on our own strike force.

This is tantamount to denying the value of the solemn undertakings of assistance contained in the Atlantic Pact. The measure which the Government has just taken is therefore a half measure. France should have withdrawn from the Alliance, not from the organisation.

Conversely, to inform the Americans, as we did, that there was no question of this and that it would be an insult to the United States to doubt their determination to defend Europe by all means, is going out to meet the subject of European concern.

The question therefore arises and it is certainly unfortunate that our American friends have often underestimated European concern.

... The United States' hesitation to help us set up our nuclear forces was a serious mistake .

... For our part, we thought that in view of the effort France had made, and is still making, to provide itself with a nuclear arsenal, the Government would have informed the United States that the conditions laid down in the amendment to the McMahon Act for the exchange of nuclear secrets had been fulfilled by France as was the case for Britain.

... We thought — and would have supported you had you done so — that since you wished France, like Britain, to have on its territory its own stock of A or H bombs and missiles of sufficient range to reach the territory of a possible aggressor, you would have insisted that it was absurd to impose on our country such enormous expenditure to carry out tests and acquire the knowledge necessary for implementing its policy.

We thought you would have pointed out that it was not reasonable to refuse to provide us with information which we know is possessed by the USSR and at least partly by China.

The main problem the Atlantic Alliance ought to face today is not the lamentable waste of intelligence, time and money which our withdrawal from NATO involves for all its members, but the production and conditions for the use of nuclear weapons, the control of dissemination which will no longer be governed by the simplistic approach of wishing for the United States, Russia and Britain to retain a monopoly.

Admittedly, these problems would be easier to solve if the United States had a counterpart in the form of a European political authority with European production and a European force.

Co-ordination and co-operation would be easier. Europe could negotiate with America on an equal footing and this improved balance would lead to stronger guarantees.

But since no progress has been made with political and military Europe — largely because of lack of confidence resulting from too many unilateral decisions taken in other respects — nothing could be worse than to allow the example which the French Government has just given to spread.

If other governments imitate us, the Americans will soon go back across the Atlantic and the British the Channel, and the Germans will have an independent army of their own and why not a strike force of their



own as well.

Is this really what you want? I cannot think so.

If therefore you want something else, if you want our nuclear force to have a meaning — for the Mirage IV and French nuclear weapons add a further element of uncertainty to deterrence only insofar as they have the benefit of the NATO structure as a whole — there is only one solution: to seek agreement in the Alliance on nuclear problems, and in particular on the doctrinal difference which the Prime Minister made so much of in his speech yesterday and which separates us from our fourteen partners, concerning the best way to make use of deterrence.

You want immediate intervention with nuclear weapons. Our allies advocate a flexible response, i.e. before proceeding with massive nuclear retaliation, they want to make sure that it is really a major aggression and not a frontier incident or an uncontrolled incursion.

I am only repeating the Prime Minister's words.

That is why our allies have always insisted that the NATO conventional force structure should not be dismantled.

I am not convinced that there is a real difference between your thinking and theirs, for if you had to press the button which would open the doors of hell, I am sure you would wish to be certain there was no other way out!

Moreover, in view of the disproportion between our nuclear resources and those of the possible aggressor, we would have in any event to co-ordinate our action with that of our allies so as not to be automatically the first victims of retaliation.

All that should have been negotiated, had you not merely been seeking a pretext for breaking away.

It should have been negotiated first with the United States and Britain and then with our other allies. I agree with Mr. Mondon that General de Gaulle, President Johnson and Mr. Harold Wilson should meet and that the heads of the three nuclear powers of the Alliance should together discuss the main questions connected with nuclear weapons.

If an agreement were possible, the Alliance would regain its vigour and vitality. It would hold good for the next ten or fifteen years and would be the best guarantee for the maintenance of western solidarity and consequently of peace.

That is what I believe should have been the Government's goal.

... Unfortunately, once again I see what it has undone, what it has destroyed, but I fail to see what is being done instead.

What will your defence policy be after withdrawing from NATO?

Back to sacred egoism? Every man for himself and God for all?

That was my impression from listening to Mr. Couve de Murville stressing on television that nuclear weapons were strictly national.

You have since been speaking of bilateral agreements as in the good old days. We believe that such methods are out of date and that European defence can never again be organised with strict respect for its geographical divisions, on land or in the air.

Mr. Debré told the Finance Committee last week that your decisions would not entail additional expenditure. Does that mean that you will leave our planes without long-range radar protection and our forces in Germany without tactical nuclear weapons to replace the American weapons which will be withdrawn from them?

Are you thinking — this would be a curious step back in history — of a European defence community, as suggested by someone who often repeats your views in Germany, the former Defence Minister, Mr. Strauss?

Are you playing with the illusion of French neutrality, as might be deduced from certain remarks by the Prime Minister?

There is indeed something disturbing about hearing Mr. Pompidou state, as he did on 28th March, that “in the event of war between the USSR and the United States, we have a better chance of escaping if we are not integrated in the American system”.

Such words seem hardly compatible with the statement that France is still a member of the Atlantic Alliance and is still bound by the treaty obligations.

I do not wish to criticise your intentions, but, as you know, most of our partners have strong doubts regarding the practical and lasting possibility of France remaining in the Alliance without taking part in its military organisation and regarding the effectiveness of what from now on will be France’s semi-membership of an Alliance which, in spite of what you say, forms a whole with its military organisation. You know this and yet you do not hesitate to risk throwing everything out of gear.

We are in complete disagreement with this reckless decision which weakens our country militarily, politically and morally, and which also weakens our allies and is consequently dangerous for peace.

Our view is that the greatness of a country does not depend on its having a free hand. It consists of taking its share of responsibility and we condemn your withdrawal from NATO for this reason too, not out of a party spirit, but because we are sincerely convinced of this.