


Political consultations on defence matters after France's withdrawal from the NATO integrated military structure

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Political consultations on defence after France's withdrawal from NATO's integrated command

At a press conference on 21 February 1966, General de Gaulle announced that he intended to 'amend the provisions currently in force in order to re-establish a normal situation of sovereignty in which whatever is de facto French in terms of land, skies, sea and forces, and any foreign element which there may be in France, would no longer be subject to anyone other than the French authorities alone'.

[1] On 7 March he wrote to US President Lyndon B. Johnson: *'France proposes to recover, throughout its territory, the full exercise of its sovereignty, which is currently damaged by the permanent presence of allied military elements or by the habitual use made of its skies, to cease its participation in the "integrated" commands and no longer to make forces available to NATO.'* [2] On 11 March an aide-mémoire was sent to the 14 other NATO members [3] to confirm France's decision. A further aide-mémoire was sent on 29 March stating the deadlines: withdrawal of the general staffs and bases had to be completed by 1 April 1967.

After the creation of NATO's integrated military structure in 1950, France had accommodated many of the Alliance's civil and military installations. [4] In 1966, there were nearly 30 000 allied soldiers permanently stationed there.

The French and British points of view

The 1966 decision was not a break; it was more of a culmination. First of all, it was the culmination of a whole series of French proposals for reforming the Atlantic Alliance. In that, French President de Gaulle was the heir to his predecessors in the Fourth Republic. Georges Bidault had proposed that there should be a High Atlantic Council as far back as 1950, long before de Gaulle's memorandum of 1958. Those reforms had, however, proved impossible to carry out: *'we could certainly have imagined the start of negotiations on amending the existing provisions by common agreement. [...] All the signs are, unfortunately, that such an undertaking would be doomed to failure, as France's partners all seem to be, or say that they are, in favour of maintaining the status quo, or indeed of strengthening everything which, from France's point of view, now seems unacceptable.'* [5]

But it was also the culmination of the policy of national independence and the establishment by France of a nuclear force of its own — which was set in motion long before de Gaulle. The first French atomic bomb was exploded in Reggane on 13 February 1960. In January 1964, France created its strategic air forces. It was able to set up its own deterrent independently of the United States.

For the British, France's announcement that it was leaving the integrated military command was not really a surprise, despite declarations about the 'sudden', 'abrupt' French withdrawal. The proof is that London had been studying the possibility of a French withdrawal since 1963. [6] What did surprise the British and Americans, however, was the deadline. The British reaction was the harshest within the Alliance. The election situation in Britain had a great deal to do with it. Britain was concerned that Germany might become the United States' main partner in NATO and that it would therefore find itself downgraded following the French withdrawal. The British were also afraid that European cooperation centred on the Franco-German tandem would be stepped up and that they would be excluded there too. The British government was therefore keen to seize back the initiative immediately. It decided to coordinate the reply from the Fourteen to the French memorandum, focusing on two principles: the maintenance of the integrated military organisation and joint political action. Britain also went to work on taking control of the reorganisation of the Alliance's structures. France had announced that the Atlantic Council could remain at the Porte Dauphine. The British wanted to persuade their allies of the need to move it elsewhere. At the ministerial meeting of the

Fourteen on 7 and 8 June, agreement in principle was reached on ‘colocating’ the Council and SHAPE. London, which had been a candidate in 1950, repeated its proposal to host the body. For the same reason as in 1950, the British capital was passed over in favour of Belgium: for strategic reasons, it seemed more advisable to base the Headquarters of the Alliance on the mainland, close to the potential front. Mons was therefore designated to host SHAPE and Brussels to host the Atlantic Council.

What was discussed in the WEU?

France’s decision in 1966 to withdraw from NATO’s integrated military command raised a certain amount of difficulty and strategic anxiety regarding the defence of the West. NATO’s forces could not go through neutral Switzerland or Austria; they needed access to French territory to link the forces in Germany and Benelux to those stationed in the Mediterranean area. France had to open its territory and airspace up to the Alliance’s forces.

There was also the problem of the French forces in Germany. In March 1966 France announced that it would agree to keep them stationed there. This, though, raised a legal question: what would their status be? They were not occupation forces any longer. There therefore had to be a bilateral agreement with the German government.

On these issues, WEU played its part as a forum for discussion. Firstly, at the request of the allies under the Modified Brussels Pact, France reaffirmed its faith in WEU and in Article V of the Pact. This assured the Europeans of France’s loyalty in the event of a Soviet attack. As regards the French forces in Germany, an exchange of letters between French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville and Willy Brandt, on 21 December 1966, set the seal on a bilateral agreement on the stationing of the French Forces in Germany (60 000 men). This was followed by an agreement concluded on 22 August 1967 between General Ailleret, Head of the French Army General Staff, and General Lemnitzer, NATO Supreme Commander.^[7]

France’s participation in WEU ultimately lessened the effects of France’s withdrawal from NATO’s integrated command and provided another forum for the discussion of military questions with the British.

[1] Press conference by General de Gaulle, 21 February 1966, http://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/press_conference_held_by_general_de_gaulle_paris_21_february_1966-en-6ae5dc3e-af30-4253-9926-980c271ad94b.html

[2] Letter from General de Gaulle to President Johnson, 7 March 1966, <http://www.cvce.eu/en/search?q=Lettre+du+g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral+de+Gaulle+au+pr%C3%A9sident+Johnson%2C+7+mars+1966>

[3] Aide-mémoire from the French government to the representatives of the members of NATO, 11 March 1966, http://www.cvce.eu/obj/aide_memoire_from_the_french_government_11_march_1966-en-690b3dd8-ee03-4737-85a4-d5b839b2e0dc.html

[4] With their families, this came to nearly 80 000 people. The economic and social consequences for France were far from negligible. It was estimated at the time that nearly 50 000 French citizens made their living, directly or indirectly, from the Allied presence. RAFLIK, Jenny. Lorsque l’OTAN s’est installée en France ... In: *Relations internationales*, No 129, 2007, pp. 37–50. http://www.cvce.eu/obj/nato_forces_in_france_1966-en-95dc4b38-4263-4503-8a68-624de6cf6564.html

[5] Télégramme de M. Couve de Murville, ministre des Affaires étrangères, à différents représentants diplomatiques de la France à l’étranger: Paris, 15 mars 1966, T. Strictement réservé. In : Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Commission de publication des documents diplomatiques français. Documents diplomatiques français: 1966, Tome I, 1er janvier-31

mai. Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 2006. Numéro du document 176. pp. 442-446.

[6] GIGLIOLI, Alessandra. *Le Retrait de la France du Commandement intégré de l'OTAN*, thesis written on a NATO research fellowship. CPEA, 1998–2000. [Online] <http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/home.htm> page reference required here for this important point

[7] It stipulated that in the event of a conflict the French forces in Germany could be attached to the operational control of the Allied Commander Central Europe, with, of course, the prior consent of the President of the Republic. Lastly, France remained part of the air alert network NADGE — NATO Air Defence Ground Environment — and left the Donges-Metz military oil pipeline linking the Atlantic and Germany open. It also gave NATO airplanes overflying France a system of annual authorisation.