

Bienvenue Grande Nation: The return of France in NATO's military integrated structures



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The return of France into NATO's integrated military command structures can be called a second Saint-Malo. In 1998 the British-French Declaration of Saint-Malo paved the way for the establishment of the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP).

Now the relationship between NATO and the EU could change profoundly. From a military point of view the reintegration of France is not a big gain, since Paris is already amongst the most active NATO members and one of the biggest troop providers in NATO-led military operations. The real importance of this change lies in its political consequences. The former approach of nearly obsessive isolation could make way for a transatlantic partnership corresponding to the ideal type of a two-pillar alliance once cherished by former US President John F. Kennedy and now supported by the French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Anyway, Paris will earn a privileged place in NATO. Its demand for high-ranking command posts has indeed been satisfied: Paris will take over two of them. The first one is the *Allied Command Transformation* (ACT) in Norfolk, Virginia. On the one hand, this post enables France to play a key role in the conceptual development and the military transformation of the alliance. On the other hand, it is less important than the *Allied Command Operations* (ACO), which is responsible for the planning, command and control of military operations. Secondly, France will take over the Regional Commando in Lisbon, which encompasses the NATO Response Force (NRF) headquarters and a satellite centre. Paris, which has a special interest in the field of space-based intelligence, has been actively engaged in the NRF since its outset. Now, France's military establishment should be happy with the 900 new jobs in Brussels, while its armament industry – politically close to Sarkozy – hopes for new orders to reinforce the ESDP and a better access to the American market.

From France's perspective, its return in the integrated command has not completed the necessary reform of NATO's obsolete structures. In future, France will be represented again in the Defence Planning Committee (DPC), but a participation in the Nuclear Planning Group is excluded. In spite of being a growing financial burden, the "force de frappe" is still an indispensable symbol of national sovereignty. Paris will in any case continue to strive for a permanent European headquarters capable of planning and conducting autonomous military operations. An initiative by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxemburg was brusquely rejected by the US and the UK in 2003. Five years later serious deliberations on this contentious topic have started. The strongest opposition to such project seems now to come from London, not the USA.

The French White Book of 2008 mentions three other reform ideas. Firstly, NATO should primarily concentrate on Art. 5 activities, but also act in the field of crisis management,

excluding civilian security and humanitarian operations. Secondly, NATO's reform should lead to a better task-sharing between Americans and Europeans to be reflected in an adapted organisational structure. Thirdly, NATO should improve its planning procedures and rationalise its command structures.

By returning in NATO's military structures, Paris has made a bet on the future. A final assessment of this decision will depend on whether and how NATO's reform will proceed, and whether this will have positive repercussions on the ESDP. In the end, Paris is interested in strategic political goals, rather than in military questions:

- France wants to have more influence in a changing NATO in order to have a better control over this process;
- The ESDP shall evolve into an equal partner within NATO in order to recalibrate the alliance in favour of the EU;
- The EU, NATO and the US shall act to the benefit of the global order, which could lead to the creation of an informal directorate.

It is beyond doubt that the relations between France and the US have become much more dynamic. The operative challenges and the new threats are of course important drivers for this development. But even more significant is the idea that an effective European defence can be better built up within rather than outside NATO. It is only with this approach that the deep mistrust of "atlanticist" EU members such as the UK and Poland towards France's purposes can be overcome.

At the same time there are still many uncertainties and open questions. With regard to France-US bilateral relations, for instance, how long will the honeymoon last? And what is to be expected for the future? As far as the EU and NATO are concerned, what concrete effects will the French reintegration into NATO's military structures have on NATO itself? How will it influence the ongoing deliberations on a new strategic concept? Which institutional reforms are likely to be agreed upon? Considering the differing European interests within the alliance, will it be possible to create a European pillar? If so, what would this mean for NATO's decision making process? Is it possible and desirable to assimilate the different roles of the EU and NATO? Is it possible to define a sort of task-sharing between NATO and the EU, and, if so, how should it look like? Finally, are France's European partners able and willing to support Nicolas Sarkozy's ambitious plans?

Some of these questions may soon find an answer, other not. The relations between France and NATO will certainly not be free from tension in the future. Nevertheless the return of France into NATO's integrated military structures opens a window of opportunity to reform NATO and make it more suitable to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

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