

Explaining French interests in NATO's eastward expansion

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Abstract: *With the end of the Cold War, there emerged a need in Europe to reshape its policies according to the changing nature of European security. The continent had been bound together by a common security order by virtue of NATO but major European powers still followed policies of national interest. France being one of these countries has successfully managed this policy by trying to diminish American influence in NATO while engaging in successful diplomacy with Germany at the same time in the context of NATO's eastward expansion.*

De Gaulle's France

It was in 1966 that De Gaulle's France withdrew from NATO's military wing, protesting against American domination in this Euro-Atlantic Alliance. France has since followed the principle of national self-interest and this approach prevailed throughout the Cold War period. Indeed, as former French Defence Minister Leotard commented once: "The major lesson I learnt from General De Gaulle is that only the leaders of a country can tell where its vital interests lie and when they are threatened. At the moment of truth, a nation has no friends."¹

However, France today has changed drastically since the days of the Cold War. This change of French character did not come from inside but was brought about by the post-Cold War order in Europe. During the Cold War, France had the privilege of nuclear weapons and its geopolitical position in Europe served to its advantage. The end of the Cold War and German reunification has strongly challenged French considerations of being a third superpower. Its privilege of being a nuclear power no longer serves the same purpose that it did during the Cold War as the role of nuclear weapons is increasingly being replaced by a rise in conventional forces. This is due to the changing nature of European security which has adopted a more political rather than defence orientation.

With its huge size, resources and armed forces the United States is the only country capable of providing global leadership today. The Gulf War and the Bosnian conflict testify to this reality. Moreover, the German factor

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has appeared strong as never before by being a major hindrance in French ambitions of acquiring a dominant leadership role in Europe. Germany is gaining considerable influence in Eastern Europe and this is seen by France as a challenge to its interests in the same region.

Since withdrawal from NATO's military wing, France has stressed the need for more independent European forces under European command. It has been a major supporter of the West European Union (WEU) coupled with the idea of Eurocorps which should be directly under WEU command. The WEU needed to strengthen as a parallel to NATO and is defended on grounds that its strength is essential for a strong NATO since all WEU countries are NATO members as well. However, if preventive operations are required, the WEU could operate together with NATO. Building strong relationships with the United States and Canada through NATO has been a primary goal of French foreign policy.²

French insistence of a separate European identity did not come about until 1992. At the time, the government realised challenges of the changing security situations in Europe and. French leaders recognised that staying away from NATO would put them at a disadvantage in these security matters. For the first time, France agreed on the placement of the Eurocorps under direct NATO command,³ thereby recognising the new political role of NATO which required broader cooperation. This also led France taking part in peacekeeping operations though it still held the de Gaullian line of national self-interest.

“Certainly, France increased her role in peacekeeping, and also proved a staunch supporter of many US initiatives concerning the former Yugoslavia, acknowledging that only NATO possessed the knowledge to carry out arduous peacekeeping operations; yet it displayed continued ambivalence towards the idea of NATO commanding such operations, insisting that peacekeeping should be run by a special civilian representative of the UN Secretary- General.”⁴

Nonetheless, these peacekeeping operations under the UN and the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) proved to be a milestone in integrating France into NATO. Credit goes to the then newly elected right-wing government in 1993 which ensured that France attended NATO meetings in Brussels, thus bringing the country back into the NATO fold.⁵ However, by adopting a more 'cooperative' role in Europe, France did not altogether give up its national self-interest policy. It only made a compromise to get a better share in European security matters.

NATO's eastward expansion – a French perspective

A comparison between the two white papers of 1972 and 1994 reveals clear national interest-based thinking of the French state. While the white paper of 1972 laid much emphasis on nuclear power to protect national interests, the one in 1994 revealed the need for replacing nuclear weapons with conventional forces since the role of nuclear forces today is mainly the protection of conventional forces as an option of last resort.⁶

Conventional forces had to be increased by a factor of three. This meant increasing them from 40,000 to 120,000 men who covered an area of about 5,000 to 7,000 kilometres. In comparison with 1972, the threat to national security in 1994 could emerge in such a large area that defining boundaries was unimaginable. Moreover, such a threat could possibly emerge from the south or east of the Atlantic; French resources and soldiers would be rendered impotent in any such situation as they were outnumbered in such a large area.⁷ Significantly lower standards of democracy, economic prosperity and stability in countries of Central Europe and the Caucasus could create problems for France's national security and it might not have had the ability to act in such a situation.

Earlier French stance on NATO expansion was, therefore, to give new members a second-class status since this would give them time to strengthen their structures within the auspices of NATO.⁸ Reversal of this position became possible as result of pressure from its new European ally Germany, which insisted on the membership of Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in the Alliance as it saw direct economic benefits in admitting these new members. France bowed to this pressure and finally agreed upon the full membership status of these countries as German Foreign Minister Kinkel made it clear that "the NATO principle is that there would be no members of second-class and that there will be no gambling on their membership."⁹

Although France had no traditional contacts or a cultural relationship with Central and Eastern European countries like Germany did, it ceased to oppose their admission into NATO since this could possibly provide it with an opportunity to extend its own political and economic influence. And while Germany would gain the most immediate benefits, France too saw potential of economic benefits at some later stage. Moreover, in order to diminish American influence in Europe and establish a separate European identity – ideas that have been dominant in French politics - increased cooperation with Germany was necessary. There was simply no choice for the French to act otherwise.

France has long been considering its full integration into NATO with the hope of being able to reform the organisation and decrease American influence in it. This has been realised now as France finally rejoined NATO's integrated military command in 2009 while also maintaining its independent nuclear deterrent programme. Credit again goes to the right-wing government of Nicholas Sarkozy for being able to balance self-interests with more global concerns.¹⁰

During Chirac's government, France had emerged as a strong supporter of the East European cause. President Chirac had made it clear to Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary that his country fully supported their admission into NATO. Besides, responding to East European concerns of increasing German influence gave him an opportunity to boost France's profile.¹¹

In parallel, France had been the foremost advocate of Romanian and Slovenian admission to the Alliance. France refused American objections that the costs of admitting two new members would be too high. As the new role of NATO is more of a peacekeeping organisation and a system for managing crises with limited equipment and infrastructure, France saw no logic in this reasoning.¹² France's support for the admission of Romania and Slovenia had geo-strategic as well as historical and cultural reasons. France neighbours the latter and obviously saw the possibility of its direct influence in this newly freed country. It would be an error, however, to compare this with German influence in the Visegrad countries especially Poland. There are a large number of ethnic Germans living in Poland while this is not the case in Slovenia for France.

Another reason why France supports the Slovenian cause could be seen in economic terms - similar to German advocacy for Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. France could claim to have the right to make its borders safer by promoting and stabilizing democracy in neighbouring Slovenia, thus protecting itself from conflicts in Central Europe and the Caucasus. The reason for advocating the Romanian case is also rooted in history. The French Revolution had deeply influenced Romanian society and had narrowly attached Romanian society to the ideas of westernization.

"In Transylvania, the Romanian elite preserved its commitment to Josephism but buttressed their arguments for national equality and religious toleration with French nationalism and egalitarianism... Moldavian peasants rejected the Revolution at the urging of the Catholic Church, but the boyars, true to the Old Regime, adapted French ideas to their quest for an independent nation-state controlled by aristocracy. By the end of the

eighteenth century, some Transylvanian peasants and boyars were even hoping that Napoleon would send his army to help them achieve their goals. Studying the French Revolution and extracting useful ideas from it also accelerated the Romanian's Westernization."¹³

The French approach has been quite rational and objective in the perspective of the post-Cold War situation. The quest for its unique cultural identity is equally understandable as it is an integral feature of French nationalism. It could simply be asserted that French politics have not changed since 1989 as France has followed the principle of national self-interest throughout this period. This has gone in parallel with efforts to reduce American influence in NATO on one hand while engaging in successful diplomacy with Germany on the other.

Notes & References

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