

# France and NATO

## *Getting to 'Oui'*

Leo Michel

In February 1996 - soon after France ended its 30-year absence from Allied defence ministers meetings and NATO's Military Committee - President Chirac told the U.S. Congress that France was ready to "take its full share" in "NATO's adaptation, including its military side, as long as the European identity can assert itself fully."<sup>1</sup> By year's end, however, intra-Alliance negotiations foundered after Chirac insisted that NATO's southern command pass from American to European (presumably French) leadership. Talks on an expanded French role collapsed in 1997, and the imbroglio helped to ignite a decade of transatlantic and intra-European wrangling over NATO and EU responsibilities in defence issues, spanning capabilities development to the planning and conduct of operations.

Now fast forward to November 2007. In his address to Congress, President Sarkozy appealed to the United States to "have confidence in Europe". "NATO cannot be everywhere", he stated, and 'pragmatism', not 'ideology', demands that "Europeans give themselves the means of ensuring a growing share of their defence". The French president continued: "At the same time... I want to affirm my attachment to NATO... I wish to see France, a founding member of the Alliance and one of its leading contributors, take its full place in the effort to renovate (Alliance) instruments and means of action and, in this context, evolve (France's) relations with the Alliance in parallel with the evolution and reinforcement of European defence... The European Union and the Alliance must march hand in hand."<sup>2</sup>

Sarkozy's words were warmly applauded by the assembled Senators, Congressmen, and top American government officials and military leaders. But a few months after his visit, the question remains: will France and its Allies avoid repeating the disappointments and recriminations that followed the 1996-97 experience?

The protagonists might benefit by reading *Getting to Yes*, a classic study on negotiation methods.<sup>3</sup> The authors describe the pitfalls of 'positional bargaining', where each side essentially tells the other what it wants and then haggles to reach an acceptable

compromise. The risks: egos - of individuals and governments - become tied to defending positions rather than meeting the parties' underlying concerns; arguments eventually damage ongoing relationships; and the situation worsens when multiple parties become involved. Better, advise the authors, to: emphasize serious communication, not 'playing to the gallery'; focus on interests, not just positions; and create 'options for mutual gain'.

### How to apply such an approach?

First, the French government must address a deficit of public understanding of France's involvement in NATO. In the past, French officials were reluctant to do so, in part for fear of domestic political pressure to limit such arrangements. Hence, a paradox: measured in forces engaged in operations, military representation and financial contributions, French investments in NATO far exceed its analogous efforts within the EU's European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP). For example, as of January 2008, France provided some 2,000 military personnel to NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR) and 1,500 military personnel to NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. In comparison, French military deployments under EU leadership, now consisting primarily of some 150 personnel in Bosnia, will level off at approximately 2,250 after the planned deployment of the EU Force to Chad and the Central African Republic. France ranks as the fifth



largest financial contributor to NATO, paying approximately 156 million Euros in 2006 to its civilian, military, and operations budgets. In contrast, the EU's entire budget for its Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) budget was around 200 million Euros in 2007. And in addition to its 90 liaison officers, the current French military representation in NATO includes some 110 officers and non-commissioned officers who work within the two strategic commands, SHAPE and Allied Command Transformation, and 90 others scattered in various NATO agencies. By comparison, the EU Military Staff and European Defence Agency total about 300 personnel. Still, ESDP - not NATO - enjoys pride of place in French political discourse.<sup>4</sup>

Even before Sarkozy's visit to Washington, there were hopeful signs of change in French attitudes. For example, last July a report by three French senators described, in unaccustomed detail, France's role in NATO and advanced, albeit tentatively, arguments for enhanced participation in its structures.<sup>5</sup> In October, a top French general, echoing earlier comments by his defence minister, told *Le Figaro* that 'normalization' of relations with NATO, where "France is always suspected of having a hidden agenda", will facilitate progress with European defence.<sup>6</sup> And the government's White Paper on defence and national security, due to be completed this spring, affords another opportunity to correct NATO's 'bogeyman' image in parts of the French political establishment. A better

informed French public is more likely to accept the logic of increasing participation and influence in NATO and rejecting the 'zero-sum game' approach of some EU-philes.

This will not be easy, however. Before Sarkozy's visit to Washington, one commentator warned that 'reintegration' would equate to France's 'trip to Canossa' - the Italian castle where, in 1077, the excommunicated German emperor did penance and was reconciled with the pope.<sup>7</sup> And a former Socialist foreign minister suggested that if France were to become a 'normal' Ally, it would be viewed by many nations as 'realignment with the United States', resulting in a marginalisation of France's international influence.<sup>8</sup>

It is hard to imagine that the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, who have been targeted by French aircraft and Special Forces in Afghanistan, are influenced by France's absence from NATO's Defence Planning Committee; or that Russia or Iran seriously care whether France rejoins the Nuclear Planning Group; or that Asian, African, or Latin American leaders are impressed by relatively small French representation in the integrated military structures. Still, few French commentators seem ready openly to challenge the notions that France's 'specific status' in NATO serves as a rallying point for countries anxious to resist American 'hegemony'. And even an eminent parliamentarian and member of Sarkozy's political party declared after the president's return from Washington: "I consider

that it is preferable for France to keep its current status (in NATO), which works well operationally and which does not compromise our country's freedom of action."<sup>9</sup>

Second, to avoid the traps of 'positional bargaining', Paris will need to resist certain temptations.

For example, in a September interview, President Sarkozy linked his consideration of 'reintegration' to creating space for French representatives 'at the highest levels' of NATO decision-making.<sup>10</sup> (His other stated precondition was an 'advance on European defence', whose contours French officials have yet to define in detail.<sup>11</sup>) However, simply tabling a list of desired NATO posts - command positions here, staff responsibilities there - developed as a result of internal French calculations is more likely to offend Allies than convince them. Over-reaching, particularly for key posts assigned to generals and admirals (and coveted by other Allies), is not the only problem. Many of France's European partners, as well as the United States, will want to understand how Paris sees the 'big picture' - that is, how increased French participation will contribute to NATO's overall strategy, reforms, capabilities, and operational effectiveness, not to mention facilitating its still difficult relations with the EU. (In a positive move in late 2007, Paris reportedly advanced practical suggestions to improve NATO-EU cooperation.)

Similarly, Paris would be wise not to base its 'normalisation' with NATO on explicit concessions by or trade-offs with Washington. This must be a multilateral, not bilateral, process. True, the United States plays a pre-eminent role in NATO, but the arguments for increased French participation have as much to do with improving France's interoperability and credibility with fellow Europeans as it does with parrying what some French officials claim - a bit self-servingly - is 'American domination' of the Alliance.

The United States, Canada and the other European Allies can help this process in many ways. They, too, must steer clear of public posturing or misplaced triumphalism. Washington's tone is particularly important, and it could help by emphasising its 'partnership' with Allies rather than its 'leadership' of NATO. But the other Allies (especially those who, like the Netherlands, are members of both NATO and the EU) can use judicious public

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statements and private encouragement to stiffen Sarkozy's determination to move ahead with NATO despite his domestic political resistance. Moreover, 'positional bargaining' is not a uniquely French temptation and needs to be avoided on all sides, including among the other European Allies. This is true not only for those who were founding members of the Alliance, but also for the relative newcomers who claim (with some justification) to have 'paid their dues'. Fortunately, there is more than one option for updating NATO structures in ways that improve efficiency and equitably redistribute the responsibilities and burdens within the Alliance. (Some American, British, and Dutch ideas for streamlining NATO commands apparently are not so different from the French.) And while France needs to be realistic in its vision for European defence, its fellow Europeans, who increasingly appreciate the potential as well as limitations of the EU's instruments, are anxious to help shape a 'win-win' outcome for both NATO and the EU.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the United States, of course, cannot build European capabilities; that is the responsibility of European nations. But Washington can help, for example, by removing outdated impediments to transatlantic defence industrial cooperation that concern many Allies, not just the French.

At stake in this hoped-for 'rapprochement' is making the Alliance work better in the face of huge and constantly evolving challenges - from Afghanistan and Kosovo to international terrorism and the increasing risks of proliferation of dangerous weapons technologies -, not settling historic grudges.

Mission impossible? To (slightly) paraphrase Descartes: "It is not enough to have the correct thoughts; the main thing is to apply them well."

L. Michel is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, Washington, D.C. The author's views do not necessarily represent the official policy of the Department of Defense or any other U.S. Government agency.

1. Speech to Congress, 1 February 1996.
2. Speech to Congress, 7 November 2007.
3. Roger Fisher and William Ury, *Getting to Yes*, Houghton Mifflin Company (New York), 1981.
4. See the author's April 2007 monograph, "NATO's French Connection: *Plus ça change...?*", accessible at: [www.ndu.edu/INSS/Repository/Outside\\_Publications/Michel/France%20and%20NATO%20commentary%20final%20dated.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/INSS/Repository/Outside_Publications/Michel/France%20and%20NATO%20commentary%20final%20dated.pdf). Troop contribution figures drawn from French Defence Ministry and EU websites.

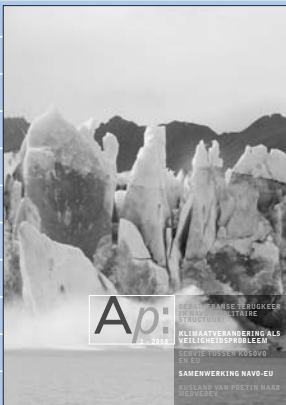
5. *Rapport d'information*, no. 405, was published in July 2007 by the French Senate under the auspices of Senators Jean François-Poncet, Jean-Guy Branger, and André Rouvière.
  6. General Henri Bentegeat (former French Chief of Defence and now Chairman of the EU Military Committee) in *Le Figaro*, 14 October 2007.
  7. Yves Boyer in *Le Monde*, 24 September 2007.
  8. Hubert Védrine in *La France et la mondialisation* (Report to the French Presidency), 4 September 2007. The same report contains harsh allusions to France's European Allies, especially the United Kingdom, suggesting that their influence in NATO is "almost nil" and that they serve as American 'vassals'.
  9. Axel Poniatowski, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, National Assembly, on 28 November 2007.
  10. *New York Times*, 24 September 2007.
  11. Defence Minister Morin, in a January 2008 visit to Slovenia, hinted that France would advance new initiatives to include: developing an EU defence industrial and technology base; increasing EU planning and command capabilities; and improve EU cooperative training for military cadets.
  12. Indeed, General Bentegeat acknowledged in a 14 December 2007 interview with *Europolitics* that, in terms of European forces available for overseas interventions, "we are close to the limit, not in theoretical capacity, but in acceptability by the public and financial responsibility." His statement came before the French decision in January 2008 to furnish additional personnel, helicopters and aircraft needed for the new EU operation in Chad and CAR due to the shortfalls in contributions from other EU members.
- For an overview of NATO-EU cooperation in operations, see the author's presentation in October 2007 to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly meeting in Reykjavik, at: [www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=1276](http://www.nato-pa.int/Default.asp?SHORTCUT=1276).

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