



Dealing with the Germans: geopolitical determinism

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In his last and most moving book *L'identité de la France. Espace et histoire* (The identity of France, Space and History), the French historian Fernand Braudel posed the question: "*La géographie a-t-elle inventé la France?*" (Did geography invent France?). And in his memoirs, Charles de Gaulle had already long since given him a reply—in his most inimitable of ways. To the latter, France was not only the cradle and centrepiece of culture, but also characterised by what Braudel later called in his book "*le déterminisme géopolitique*" (geopolitical determinism).

De Gaulle, who had read the books of Jacques Bainville, was an army officer and a tank man: a "terrien" (or landlubber). From 1916 onwards he had passed the First World War as a prisoner of the Germans, and this had made him understand what France's error had been: that of not being an island like England or America. The danger for France came from the East, from Germany, and beyond Germany from Russia, (calling the latter the Soviet Union had always seemed to de Gaulle a lack of continuity in interpretation).

For years, from his work room at *Colombey les deux Eglises*, he had turned long glances towards the East. It was his fundamental experience, and he wrote in his memoirs that the destiny of France was decided on the continent, on land, and that this decision was made in the East. With this he was thoroughly ambivalent. He was sufficiently steeped in history to remember Napoleon, and to remember the *Grande Armée* on its campaign through Russia, a Russia whose every second soldier was of German mother tongue. And in 1966, when

he visited Volgograd, at one time called Stalingrad, and where a quarter of a century before Russian and Germans had fought to the death, it is said that he laconically said: "*un grand peuple*" (a great people). The Soviets present happily asked him what was the reason for such a favourable judgement, and he replied: "*qu'ils sont venus jusqu'ici*", that they got this far.

De Gaulle's German policy always depended on his Ostpolitik, and conversely his Ostpolitik depended on his German policy. This motivated his attitudes to nuclear weapons, both American and British, to Stalin, to Berlin, to the detente of the '60s, and especially to European unification. His attitude was not only the result of his experience as Head of State after 1958, or of 1944-46, but went back to earlier experiences in both French and his own personal history. His sublime pessimism, the grandiose pattern of his image of the world, his manner of waiting, then taking decisions: these all embraced the nightmares of France since the time of Napoleon and the Congress of Vienna; even more, as from Aug. 4, 1914; but most of all as from Sept. 1, 1939, when the country was dragged into the Second World War, divided inside, and with a foreign policy unclear of the way it was supposed to be going.

In August 1944, when de Gaulle ordered General Leclerc's 1st Armoured Division to march on Paris, against the strategic plan of Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, he demonstrated his political mastery. De Gaulle knew better than the Americans, that whoever holds Paris, holds France. He did not wish to travel as one of the followers of the victors, but to receive them as a ruler. Above all he did not want the communist resistance to conquer the capital, passing themselves off as the liberators of the country and lords of its destiny. In any case, de Gaulle had the advantage of having as his adversary Wehrmacht General von Choltitz, who understood the stakes and surrendered the city to him undamaged, after a merely symbolic defence. This march on Paris was not only the sum of the three nightmares of France and of de Gaulle: the Germans, the Anglo-Saxons and Soviet communism. It translated the myth of "*l'homme du 18 juin*" (the man of June 18) into reality.

Keeping Germany divided

The German nightmare—to de Gaulle the most worrisome—involved the open flank in northwest France between the ancient bishoprics of Metz, Toul and Verdun, and reminded the General of the three wars between 1870 and 1945. As had been suggested at the beginning of the 17th century by the

monarchy's legal advisers, the King of France could more easily tolerate the loss of a rich province than accept that the Germans abandoned their traditional system of local liberties.

What was at stake was the protection of French power in Central Europe. Through the rivalries between the Protestants and the Catholics of the Old Empire, and through the right of the princes and dignitaries of the Imperial Diet to make direct alliances with foreign powers, this system provided the safeguard of France. In a word, from Louis XIV to Napoleon, France's German policy was oriented towards acquiring security through subsidies and through the encouragement of disputes between local rulers or partial German pacts. And towards the end of the new "Thirty Years War of the 20th century" (as de Gaulle put it in 1944), how could the leader of Free France give up Paris's traditional geostrategic aim to acquire the left bank of the Rhine and to break German power up? How could the war not lead to the conviction that strong integration is a safer bet than weak control?

The Russian nightmare went as far back as Napoleon and memories of 1814, when the Cossacks had camped in Montmartre. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Prussian-German monarchy had taken the place of the French Republic as privileged ally of the Russians, through a policy of loans and technology. And this brought about what George F. Kennan called the "decline of Bismarck's European order", i.e. the dissolution of the alliances of the First World War. But in 1917 the Russian ally collapsed, and at Versailles—two years later—the Russian chair remained empty, while in the Rapallo Pact of 1922 the Soviets and Germans went far beyond just forgiving and forgetting the First World War. Both opposed French hegemony, and its instrument, the Little Entente, and both were hostile to the Polish Republic, which was the cornerstone of the Little Entente. With a sharp eye, tank officer de Gaulle had studied the modern war techniques that the German *Reichswehr* and the Red Army were testing in the East, but he was drawing his conclusions—in vain. In 1938 appeasement was fast sinking, while in 1939 the West lost its race against Berlin to establish an alliance with Moscow. The French army went to war with "half a soldier in half a tank" (as Malraux wrote). The catastrophe of the country, which had never really got over that of the First World War, was completed in June 1940.

It was then that de Gaulle became the voice of Free France. In 1944 however, he set about putting under his control the well armed and well organised

communists on the home front, thus also earning maneuvering space between East and West. To this end he went to Moscow and on Dec. 10, 1944 signed the *bonne et belle alliance* with Stalin. Had he wanted to resuscitate the alliance of the Third Republic with the Czar, against Berlin? Or was it that he had wanted to demonstrate to the Americans and to the British, who had ignored him in London and in Algiers, that France had a Russian option? In any case, it was a real lesson when France was not invited to Yalta in February 1945. There, in fact, it was Churchill who fought for the new role of France as a Great Power, while Stalin remonstrated over the latter's rapid collapse five years before. By June 5, 1945, France was back again amongst the Great Powers, assuming sovereignty over the defeated Reich. But once again the man in the Elysée was to wait in vain for an invitation to Potsdam.

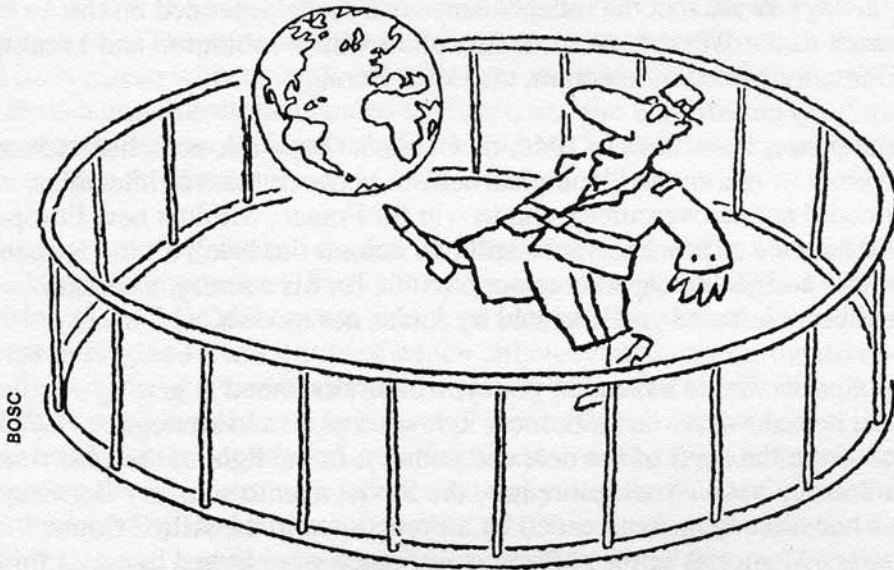
Was France a Great Power or not, or was it surviving only for the convenience of the Russians, Americans and British? How long would the Anglo-Saxons—as de Gaulle called them—give their support to France? Should this support fail, there would be no other option but to come to terms with the *chose allemande*, with the Soviets already on the Elbe, and clearly throwing their glances as far as the Rhine.

The alliances, however, changed quickly. When, some weeks after Postdam, de Gaulle went to the White House for assurance against the Germans, (through possession of the left bank of the Rhine and a share in the occupation of the Ruhr), he was informed by President Harry S. Truman that the German threat was extinguished for a long time, and that France would be protected by the American nuclear umbrella. As to the Ruhr, Stalin had demanded the same thing at the end of the Potsdam summit, and he, Truman, had refused. It was then that de Gaulle knew the hour of the wartime alliance to be over, that the pre-war conflict between Soviet Empire and the parliamentary democracies was back in force, and that France would have to choose.

Ghosts of the past

This choice, however, denied France an equal role in things, and forced it into the role of a mere follower. The General was too much of a realist to offer any opposition, either when Stalin blockaded Berlin in 1948-1949, or when Khrushchev threatened the city between 1958 and 1961. Despite this, de Gaulle missed the European balance of power, and hence his appeal to overcome Yalta.

All this demonstrates how much of a burden the Anglo-Saxon nightmare was for the General. He saw himself as a successor to Joan of Arc, and had forgotten the Hundred Years War just as little as the withdrawal, first by the Americans, then by the British, from the 1919-20 Paris peace conference, withdrawals which ended the brief period of French hegemony. De Gaulle had also not forgotten that in 1939 the British had come too late to engage in war, nor that they had sent an insufficient number of men to fight it. Neither did he ignore the fact that France had never been so alone as in the days of the



Seeking a world role

triumph of the Wehrmacht, when the British Expeditionary Force was crowding back on to its ships at Dunkirk. Neither de Gaulle's policy towards the German question, nor his Ostpolitik, nor his alliance and nuclear policies may be understood without seeing their strategic interaction and historical motives.

French nuclear weapons, introduced by de Gaulle in 1946 and continued under the Fourth Republic, always had to offer triple guarantees: against German uncertainties, against Soviet adventurism and against American retreat. Above

all, however, nuclear weapons were insurance against the return of the past: never again a 1914 and never again a 1940.

From 1944 to 1969, French policies on Germany and French Ostpolitik went through three phases, each of them determined more by Washington and Moscow than by Paris. In each phase, however, de Gaulle always sought to maintain maximum individual autonomy, even to the cost of its indispensable Western alliance, and even when France had to live beyond its means. Politics have to go on; the bill will follow. This was how the tank officer turned politician consoled himself and sought to cancel the force of gravity. He was, in the end, always aware that the independence of France depended on the maintenance of the Western alliance: first of all with Washington and London, and as Germany gained momentum, also with Bonn.

In the first phase, from 1944 to 1946, de Gaulle's Ostpolitik was characterised by the attempt to ignore the ideological schism between the wartime allies, (when it could not be overcome), and to win for France, within a new European and world balance of power (France still had colonies to lose), all the influence, all the power and all the capacity to act possible for his country, a country which had been defeated and liberated by forces not its own.

This explains de Gaulle's German policy, which was aimed at getting everything it could—power, land, men, industrial plant and strategic leverage—from the ruins of the defeated country. In the light of the cold war which followed, it is easy to ignore how the Soviet *nyet* to so many German questions had already been preceded by a French *non* in the Allied Control Commission. Memories of the sufferings of France were linked to hopes for a new European balance of power, to Germany's cost. Furthermore there was the worry that neither the Americans nor the British could be counted on in the long term. de Gaulle was not a friend to the communists, neither to those in Moscow, and even less so to the French communists. But he thought in the long term when he considered how long it would take for *raison d'état* to win over the Soviet concept of world mission.

In the end, all the factors which de Gaulle had to deal with were basically doubtful: the power of France was on loan, the benevolence of Stalin was a dream, and the alliance with the Americans and British subject to end. There was no alternative but to replace French weakness by German strength. But even before confrontation over Germany as the key European nation

polarised East-West power relationships, de Gaulle was already a resigned statesman. During containment and the Marshall Plan, world political quarrelling over Berlin, and the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany and its integration in the system of Western alliances, he was more an observer than a shaper of events.

Tense situations

On his return 12 years later, the internal structures of France were at a breaking point. Three times between 1958 and 1962, the Head of State had to face the peril of civil war. He told the cabinet that the real job needed was the psychiatrist's. The international situation was tense. Relations with America had been mixed with strategic mistrust ever since the Suez affair in 1956, when the British and French had landed in Egypt, and the US President had made it clear that American nuclear weapons would not be available to deal with threats from the Kremlin.

From that point on, French nuclear arming intensified and as soon after as possible de-Europeanised. In 1958 the American Congress replied with revision of the MacMahon Act, which blocked passage of atomic secrets, except to England—the whole of which only served to deepen the divide. De Gaulle's vision of a world political "directory" between Washington, London and Paris was intended to reapportion power to France on the one hand, on the other hand simultaneously intimidating the British and the Americans and relegating the Germans to an inferior category. But the French vision was too overburdened by the heavy mortgage of the French colonial wars to influence Washington and London. It should nonetheless be noted that, at this point, de Gaulle wanted to inaugurate a common Western global policy out of the NATO area—again a dream without fulfillment.

It was a bitter rejection, and to counter the blow the General sought a special relationship with Bonn, without, however, honouring or working on the pact concluded in Spring 1958 between Franz Josef Strauss, from Germany, Taviani from Italy and Chaban-Delmas from France—a pact establishing the common study of nuclear development, (and also arms). De Gaulle did not wish to exploit nuclear power as a federative factor within the Europe of the Six, which was then, (at least theoretically) possible. He wanted to keep nuclear power as a national trump card, not least in order to create a balanced Europe, in which France would conserve a special role. With this policy, in the long term he

contributed to the fact that during the INF crisis from 1979 to 1983, and thereafter, the nuclear issue came up between Germany and the West—and with predictable consequences for the security of France.

The Adenauer link

On the other hand, with regard to the philosophical basis of his German policy, and indeed with regard to all European questions, he had found the man who shared his premises and conclusions: Konrad Adenauer. Both de Gaulle and Adenauer considered the GDR a Stalinist paraphrase of European history, which they could wipe off the map at any moment, just on the thought. The future was thus protected against any possible disturbance German unification might bring to European equilibrium: the Federal Republic was firmly linked to Western Europe, Berlin was part of the thorny problem posed by the four Powers on the German question, and the Oder-Neisse issue had been resolved *de facto*, and put off *de jure* until a German peace treaty could be signed—not a thing for the near future.

In his memoirs Adenauer wrote what he had said, with many variations, during his tea time chats: he reassured de Gaulle that he would not make the Oder-Neisse frontier an unconditional engagement of the West in general, and of France in particular. This probably referred back to the preceding assurances given in connection with the German Treaty of 1952. In a statement Adenauer used to the very letter in his memoirs of Jan. 12, 1959, (vol 4, p 18), he said: "I could already have told him that good relations with Poland have to be one of the objectives of German policy, given that Poland is the country which most extends towards the East, whilst still remaining a nation with a Western based culture. He also ought to know that the Oder-Neisse question would have to be resolved in the peace treaty. This is also established in the German Treaty. In my opinion, it is not opportune to bring up the subject of the Oder-Neisse line at the present moment. At this point de Gaulle interrupted me and said that he would not mention the Oder-Neisse line".

De Gaulle's policy of Europeanising the German question and preserving a special role for France, had its very premises radically shaken when Khrushchev, basing his argument on the nuclear quasi-parity between the Soviet Union and the USA, attempted to upset the European chessboard right at its strategic centre: in Berlin. Berlin was entirely within the territory of the GDR—so Khrushchev in 1958—and the West had six months to come to an

agreement with the government of the GDR over a withdrawal. This sounded like a formal ultimatum. In reality it was a denial of the position left open in 1945.

Once again, as in 1945-46, de Gaulle's policy of a special position for France in the West was limited, and almost annulled by Khrushchev, who, however, was careful not to renounce formal Four Power control as a whole over Germany. A situation was thus created which not only challenged the US nuclear power, but simultaneously questioned the European role of France. De Gaulle reacted with total solidarity for the Americans. He clearly knew that it was in Berlin, and only there, that France was assured of the status of Great Power, with a veto over all German matters. This trump card he did not wish to lose, either through Eastern maneuvering, or through Western weakness. While the Americans attributed the situation to a global Soviet world plan, de Gaulle considered it more a result of Soviet domestic instability: "There is something so arbitrary and artificial about this tumult of demands and requirements the Soviets are making, that it is tempting to attribute it either to the premeditated unchaining of mad ambition, or to a desire to divert attention from great difficulties; the latter hypothesis strikes me as ... more plausible."

Recalling the failure of appeasement policies during the '30s, de Gaulle drew the conclusion that nothing should be ceded to the Soviet leader's demands, even up to the point of unavoidable war: "We are not impressed by all this tumult, this stream of insults, of formal statements and of threats, that certain nations are directing against other nations, and against ours in particular ... we recognise only too well that they are indulging in these virulent declarations and sensational outbursts only in order to fool the people—within their own country as well as abroad."

During the second Berlin crisis, de Gaulle remained calm, without giving the Americans any reason to abandon their position, and without giving the Germans any reason to doubt the General's firmness.

Too weak an ally

The beginning of the third phase of de Gaulle's Ostpolitik coincided with *détente*, that child of fear and reason, between the world powers. De Gaulle saw the moment ripe for his concept of Western European unity in a balanced system, with which France could strengthen its external negotiating power and

internal cohesion as soon as the magnetic field of the Cold War weakened. Over Berlin he had nailed his colours to the mast, and thus created a basis for negotiation with the Kremlin. He knew that the French position was lost without the Americans. But he also knew that the Kennedy administration was seeking ways to review its obligations deriving from the responsibilities of the Four Powers in Berlin, such as that of Article 7 of the German treaty. What the Kennedy aides considered a strategic game, de Gaulle judged a revolution in the apportioning of European power relationships. He was against the "sounding out talks" over Berlin, as wanted by London and Washington after the building of the wall, and sneered: "As long as the Soviet Union continues to threaten and give orders, and until it contributes to a real relaxation of the international situation, we believe we are saving our allies, and ourselves, from the catastrophic retreat, dramatic disagreement or tragic-comic mistake, which the conference would obviously have ended with."

De Gaulle also considered the 1962 Geneva disarmament conference premature and he did not allow French diplomats to participate. Yet the General probably understood before others did, that the German question would only be resolved if and when the Cold War changed its configuration, or if its more dramatic aspects were reduced. In fact de Gaulle had never believed in a Europe of committees, nor that the Europe of the Fatherlands might constitute the matrix of the future. But he knew that the German question had to be Europeanised. He never resolved the basic contradiction between wanting to strengthen France's integrity and national identity, and Europeanising Germany. But he had done much to direct towards the West, and as early as possible, the new

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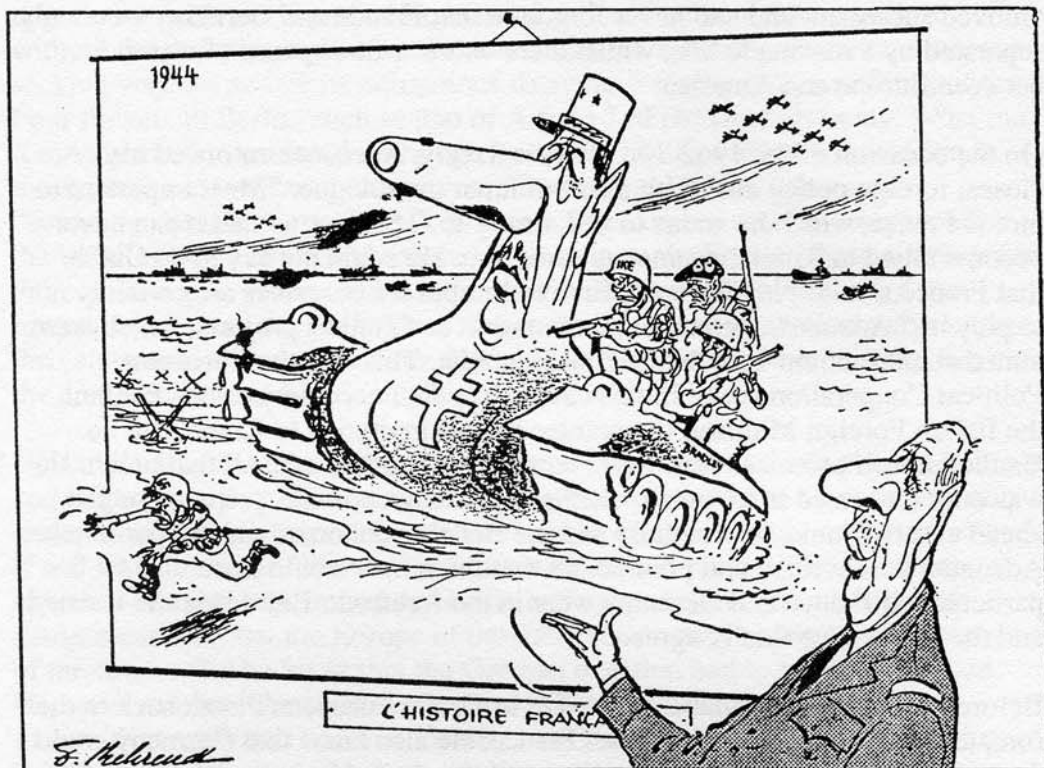
**His most well-known book is
Das ruhelose Reich; Deutschland 1866-1918.**

options opened to Germany by *détente*. It was then that for the last time he met Adenauer, who shared all his worries. Adenauer wished to tie down Erhard, his unloved successor, and had never forgotten that France and Germany were only separated by a manmade line, whilst there was a wide expanse of water between Europe and America.

On the occasion of the 1962-1963 Elysée Treaty, Adenauer entrusted his closest foreign policy aide with a sort of inner monologue: "Most important to him is France, which he wants to link firmly to Germany, so that it can never become allied to Russia, against us perhaps ... He could not say to de Gaulle that France should play Europe's first violin: but we ourselves are certainly not to play it!" Adenauer's comments referred to de Gaulle's projects, which were aimed at close union with the Federal Republic. This was the European Political Cooperation issue. In this case it was first necessary to beg Fanfani, the Italian Foreign Minister, to organise a swift invitation to Rome. But de Gaulle himself promised little involvement—nor did he care all that much. He was only interested in knowing whether the Chancellor was prepared to go ahead as a twosome, in case Italy and the Benelux countries did not participate. Adenauer was evasive and pointed out that the others would certainly participate if France and Germany were in the forefront. But de Gaulle insisted, and the Chancellor finally agreed.

Before he resigned, Adenauer wished to bring the European theme back to the fore, and this he could only do with France. He also knew that Germany could "not play a leading role for a long time yet, due to its Nazi past," and that "its power can only be used indirectly, through France ... both countries together now ... having some appreciable significance, even with respect to the United States." This was what remained of the above bipartisan alliance. Adenauer's advisers, however, warned him against a Paris-Bonn axis agreement with de Gaulle: France was too weak an ally for this kind of thing. The Federal Republic could only develop within a Europe of Six. The Federal Chancellor offered an opposite point of view: "that he had to tie down the German people. It was not so sure that they would not suddenly go hand in hand with the Russians, and then dance between the two blocks. Politically we are not very intelligent, we are political dreamers ... French-German *entente*, one people with the other, would be a great thing. They have to be tied so closely together that no German or French government could ... ever break that link again."

But Adenauer was unable to convince the Atlantic lobby within the CDU to



France's best weapon

accept the leadership of de Gaulle and France, and he guessed at the weakness of the Fifth Republic, a weakness shown with the military coup of 1961 and the revolution of 1968. De Gaulle, however, wanted German reinforcement for French negotiating power. He had wanted to link closely with the Germans, as Adenauer had wanted to link closely with the French, in order to enhance the importance of the European side of the Atlantic in its relations with America—an idea not unknown to Adenauer, though the latter was not in a situation to come to successful conclusions about this. On the whole, what de Gaulle was offering was a great project on French rather than European lines. This is why the Elysée Treaty was in its own time neither cohesive nor effective. It left mixed feelings on both sides. For Germans to both left and right of the centre, de Gaulle lived in a dream world—*folies de*

grandeur—whilst from then on Bonn, for de Gaulle, laid on the Potomac. Speaking generally, de Gaulle's policies at that time were not only unlucky, they were lacking in internal compactness, or rather strategic direction. He used France's nuclear arsenal to compensate for its role as a Great Power after the decline and end of French colonialism, though as a uniting element within a European nuclear federation, as the then German Minister of Defence, Franz Josef Strauss, had hoped. De Gaulle told the leader of the opposition, Rainer Barzel that he would not let himself to be "dragged into the Teutonic swamps of internal German disputes." Thus the Germans were left with no alternative other than "nuclear sharing". Their first attempt was with the floating Multilateral Force, which was however the first fleet to sink before it was ever launched. British, French and American doubts prevailed, and the White House preferred non-proliferation policies along with the Russians. The creation of the Nuclear Planning Group followed, which politically resolved what had remained unsolved technically.

Nuclear power policies

"It is hard to divide nuclear power", sentenced de Gaulle, and thus kept the Germans at a distance. But he offered few alternatives and his Russian policy was more rhetorical than effective. Technically it remained a dependent variable of overall East-West relations, and was not based on French export strength. In the European Economic Community of Six of that period, de Gaulle blocked the hopes of the Germans and Dutch for a supra-national union, thus opening, whether he wanted to or not, the way for British membership.

France's withdrawal from military participation in NATO had its technical reasons, because it would have been difficult to adapt French weapons to the strategy of flexible response; politically, it was motivated by the fact that French policies were not to be subordinated to American superpower planning in its stronger and weaker moments. With this move, the European pillar of NATO was weakened without enhancing French importance in Moscow, while the German position, itself strengthened through association with the Nuclear Planning Group, moved off on a different tangent.

General de Gaulle had a good sense of timing in politics—*kairos*—and he possessed a Bismarckian rapport with reality. He demonstrated this in 1944, with the advance of the tanks on Paris, and in 1960, when he lowered the *tricolore* in North Africa. But he also knew how to live with

contradictions—between Washington and Moscow, or between Bonn and London. He wanted alliances, and wanted to be independent. He wanted a Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals, but he never forgot that the European power balance would never exist without North America. He wanted European political union but at the same time a Europe of Fatherlands. He wanted to develop the role of France within the European power balance, knowing full well that in the case of a serious situation, France would have no choice. He preached going beyond the Yalta settlement, (*sortir de Jalta*), although he knew that without the guarantee of the United States, the Federal Republic would lose its stable position, and that Western Europe would become a second Hong Kong.

De Gaulle's Ostpolitik lived both within these contradictions, and in contrast to them, and it might thus be asked whether de Gaulle, from the stillborn alliance with Stalin of December 1944, ever had his own compact concept of Ostpolitik. He had a nuclear policy within the Alliance which made sense. He had a German policy which favoured control instead of integration, and sought to utilise German potential to strengthen French power. But no Ostpolitik worthy of the name resulted from all this. de Gaulle overrated the role of France, just as he overrated the importance of nuclear weapons as an ace in the game of world politics. Just as Bonn was unable to develop its own, independent Ostpolitik, (the 1971 Berlin treaty preceded the fundamental German Treaty of 1973 and limited its range and field of action), France was also incapable of following its own Ostpolitik on an independent, national basis. It never had sufficient strength for this—either as one of the Four Powers, as one of the European nuclear powers, or even as the leading political power in the Europe of the EEC. For Romania there was nothing left but to use encouraging rhetoric, which in the end was useless, and Poland, which for two centuries had been France's Eastern love, could no longer be helped. For the Soviet Union, world politics always meant American politics, while European politics meant the German issue. From the point of view of an independent role, France lacked foundations in the West, and a partner in the East.

Could things have been done differently? De Gaulle wanted political union of the Western European Six. He was convinced of his principle of Europeanisation of the German question. Rather than nuclear participation and European federation, he left the Germans the message of Gaullism. As long as the Germans were model students in the "Atlantic Class", however, this only

led to more convergence with America. But when the Germans began to feel their identity problem, and nuclear uncertainty more acutely, a new distribution of European forces was inevitable.

It was precisely those German uncertainties France feared most, which de Gaulle unwittingly favoured. Or rather they reminded France of the limits of her range of action. For de Gaulle's policy of half an army and half a nuclear weapon always rested on the hypothesis of excellent relations between Bonn and Washington, and Bonn and London, and on the fact that the Germans could be relied upon. As yet, the hour of truth has not come for de Gaulle's heritage in the German question and in Ostpolitik, and perhaps the West has been spared it. But perhaps—if the much later successors of de Gaulle and Adenauer ever lose their sense of common destiny—the General's policies will not be measured by what they achieved, but by what they failed to achieve: the abolition of the frontier on the Rhine.

References

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