

Let's change our political stance within NATO!

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Is France betraying the French Republic's universal values, its role and influence in the world?

France is a major country. Its rallying cry of liberty, equality and fraternity conveys a universal message. The French Republican motto has inspired many a struggle for democracy. It echoes the hopes that all human beings hold dear to their hearts. The Enlightenment and the Revolution of 1789 left an indelible mark on the world. France played a key role in establishing today's world order. Its influence has been real and when it left NATO in 1966 it assumed, for a while, a somewhat special role positioned between two blocs that were locked in the ruthless political struggle of the cold war. While France and the United States have never been at war with one another, both countries carry a universal message. This is doubtless why they have had numerous misunderstandings throughout modern history.

By returning to the NATO fold, is France sending out signals that it is now solely concerned with Western interests? Is it shutting itself off from a world that is opening up? I don't think so. If we look at the facts, it is clear to see that France has had a real influence in settling the world's major conflicts and global issues. Its influence is modest, however, and France rarely goes it alone. On its own France cannot solve the problems posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, radical fundamentalism, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, ethnic conflicts, lawless areas, the massacre of defenceless women and children, mafia trafficking, managing the world's resources, the food question, water supplies and global warming.

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In no way does this take away from my pride in being French, nor from my conviction that our country can play a more active role, promoting our values, in the world and in Europe. Nevertheless, I do not believe that in order to fulfil that role we are obliged to maintain our current position in NATO, in particular at a time when the Alliance is in need of reform. That is worth debating, however.

Is France turning its back on the political stance adopted by General de Gaulle in his day?

General de Gaulle's decision to leave NATO's integrated command was, in my opinion, bound up with the French nuclear programme that was then under development. This act of wilful independence was necessary and justified at the time, even though voices were raised against the move on the left of the political spectrum. The debate was between the Soviet Union and Western Europe along with the United States. China, India and Brazil had no real economic influence and, with the exception of China, no or very little political influence on the way the world was run.

Today the situation has changed. France has a nuclear arsenal and all agree that it should be maintained at the best possible level. It is clear that this deterrent force de facto serves the security interests of the EU member states. Indeed, it is fair to say that if there was any threat of violence against France, its neighbours and allies would also be involved. France no longer has the same influence over China and India, and the collapse of the Soviet bloc has if anything reduced its influence even in Europe. I think that it is not facing up to facts to say that France, in its current position in NATO, could assume the role of mediator or offer political and moral guidance in today's world. Stating such facts does not mean giving up on France.

Greatness lies not so much in words as in the tangible results of well-considered acts. This much was evident when George W. Bush declared war on Iraq: more than any fine words, what counted was the resolve to have nothing to do with the course of action decided on by the United States. General de Gaulle did not want France to be subordinate to anything or anyone, nor to any organisation. Can the ideology of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century be applied and transposed to the beginning of the twenty-first century?

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As part of the European Union and like all the other member states, France is committed to sharing its fate with its partners. It is perhaps because of this commitment, wittingly and humbly shared and accepted by all, that the European area is an area of peace and security within its own borders. Shared solidarity is worth more than cold isolation which paves the way to protectionism and eventually opens the door to nationalism and all its attendant dangers. I do not believe that France is turning its back on General de Gaulle in considering full reintegration into NATO. It is worth debating, however.

Unconditional adherence to American political theories?

France is one of the founding members of the Atlantic Alliance. It has always sat on the North Atlantic Council and on all but two of its committees. In financial and human terms, France makes a significant contribution to the Alliance. 25 per cent of NATO's initial rapid reaction capabilities were provided by France. France is a loyal ally and one of NATO's 'best pupils'.

In keeping with the basic principles that govern relations between political and military institutions, the integrated military structure remains under political control and guidance at the highest level at all times. In general today—and this is unlikely to change in the future—NATO forces remain under full national command until they are assigned to the Alliance for a specific operation decided upon at the political level. In recent times, France has taken an increasingly active role in NATO's military operations. Moreover, French defence is fully compatible with NATO procedures.

With the new American President in office as of January, the time has come to relaunch transatlantic relations on a new footing. In his inaugural speech, President Obama said that the United States had to strive for even greater cooperation with other nations and uphold the ideals that unite the western world. At the 45th Munich Security Conference, Joe Biden, Vice-President of the United States, stated 'We must . . . renew NATO, so that its success in the twentieth century is matched in the twenty-first.' Dialogue is the order of the day. There is a firm and declared resolve to reopen a constructive dialogue with Russia. There is a clear commitment to cooperate and consult.

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Let us seize these opportunities, let us no longer content ourselves with taking a sham back-seat role, let us opt for a status that will strengthen our position in the world. It is from inside the organisation—where we can regain the trust of our partners—that France will have an influence and be listened to. Whatever happens, we will retain the independence of our nuclear forces, our freedom of discretion and our freedom of decision. On the other hand, by taking part in a renewed Alliance, our influence will be felt inside an institution that serves the rule of law, democratic values, peace and security. It is worth debating.

Does this, de facto, spell the end of European Security and Defence Policy?

France is fully committed to the success of ESDP. France has never wavered, either before or after St-Malo. It has been unstinting in its efforts and has tirelessly launched numerous initiatives. It has shown and implemented constant and unflagging political will. Even though ESDP has made good progress, it is not yet enough to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. European defence depends on inter-governmental decisions and our political leaders are clearly guilty of reticence, clinging to the concept of sovereignty in order to delay or hamper developments that are both necessary and useful for the future of Europeans. The EU will not be respected as a world player in the twenty-first century until it can define a common political project and develop a competitive and autonomous defence instrument.

Is that alone justification enough for France to assume that the future of ESDP depends on its changing its position in NATO? As long as it persists in its present position, France is suspected of playing against its own team. Refusing to fully rejoin the NATO military structure encourages our European partners to think that the European pillar of NATO, which we quite rightly demand, is simply a way for France to oppose America rather than an attempt to build European defence. Our present stance towards NATO is therefore completely counter-productive. It delights some who like to swagger in front of the big American brother and enjoy giving lessons. But here, as elsewhere, lucidity and humility are not faults.

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France could also listen to what its European partners are saying. In Munich, the German Chancellor, the British Foreign Secretary and the Polish Prime Minister among others made their positions clear. For them, the transatlantic axis constitutes the foundations of the European security and defence architecture. NATO and the European Union must work together. All of France's partners in the European Union share this view. That much is clear.

Faced with the current economic and social crisis, most states are tempted to cut their defence budgets. Those in favour of France's present stance suspect those states of relying on American protection and good will for their security. This argument is worth heeding and such a trend should be stopped, provided however that we can set an example and gain the confidence of those we want to convince. Rather than preaching from the sidelines, it is far better to be on the inside in order to achieve this.

The Atlantic Alliance and the European Union complement each other in the area of crisis management. Recent and ongoing crises, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, clearly demonstrate that no organisation or power, not even the United States, is capable of resolving a full-blown crisis single-handedly. NATO suffers from a lack of non-military means which are absolutely vital to successful crisis management. The European Union, on the other hand, has a wide range of such means, but currently has a major shortfall in the military capabilities necessary for large-scale operations. Stronger European defence and a reformed NATO are two complementary objectives. It should also be noted that operations carried out under EU aegis are sometimes more politically acceptable to certain countries than those led by NATO. I do not believe that ESDP would be weakened in any way by France changing its position within NATO, on the contrary. It is worth debating, however.

Is it the right time for reintegration?

In a debate, when someone asks if it's the right time to do something, it usually means they are in favour of the status quo. That is not my case. I think it is neither too soon nor too late. I think the time is right. It is the right time because the Alliance needs reforming and the President of the United States is ready to do that. His way of thinking and his cultural approach are conducive to an in-depth debate on major

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issues, in particular on the subject of security in our democracies and promoting typical European values.

NATO must adapt to the new security environment. It must take on board the new balance of power in the world and the aspirations of emerging countries and their citizens. NATO must face up to the fact that the United States needs its European allies more than ever. The organisation must clarify its fields of operation, its relations with the UN and above all it must do everything it can to engage in a constructive dialogue with Russia. France has something to say on all these subjects and already makes its views known to the North Atlantic Council, the Alliance's highest political authority. Its voice may be stronger and better heard if it is fully included in any discussions. There is no contradiction between our security in NATO and our ideals.

Now is the time to take on the challenges of this new century, from a platform of common objectives, pooled capabilities and shared resources. To take democracy forward, establish institutions that protect freedom and ensure economic and social progress for all, build a sustainable future for the planet: these are challenges that Europe and the United States must take on together. The economic crisis, which has shown up the sins and dangers of financial speculation and greed, has provided the world's democracies with an opportunity to draw up new rules.

In every area and at every level, France must take its place. Taking the plunge and rejoining the NATO military structures does not mean that France will be gagged. We shall not lose the freedom to express ourselves. Some may wonder how this decision is likely to be received, particularly in the Arab world. I think we should take account of such concerns and consider them seriously. Let's be clear, this is a political gambit along the same lines as Pascal's wager. In my view, we have more to gain than lose by changing our political position within NATO! The simplistic and convenient labels that polarise Atlantists and anti-Atlantists or pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics have been banded around for too long. They are deeply engrained in people's minds. It will take a revolution in attitudes and a long time to change this state of affairs, no matter what France decides in the coming days . . .