



HAL
open science

France's Return to NATO: The Death Knell for ESDP?

Bastien Irondelle, Frédéric Mérand

► **To cite this version:**

Bastien Irondelle, Frédéric Mérand. France's Return to NATO: The Death Knell for ESDP?. *European Security*, 2011, 19 (1), pp.29-43. 10.1080/09662839.2010.499362 . hal-01024252

HAL Id: hal-01024252

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-01024252>

Submitted on 12 Sep 2014

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



European Security

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/feus20>

France's return to NATO: the death knell for ESDP?

Bastien Irondelle^a & Frédéric Mérand^b

^a CERI - SciencesPo, Paris, France

^b Department of Political Science, University of Montreal,
Montreal, QC, Canada

Published online: 04 Oct 2010.

To cite this article: Bastien Irondelle & Frédéric Mérand (2010) France's return to NATO: the death
knell for ESDP?, *European Security*, 19:1, 29-43, DOI: [10.1080/09662839.2010.499362](https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2010.499362)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2010.499362>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

France's return to NATO: the death knell for ESDP?

Bastien Irondelle^{a*} and Frédéric Mérand^b

^a*CERI – SciencesPo, Paris, France;* ^b*Department of Political Science, University of Montreal, Montreal, QC, Canada*

(Received 8 April 2010; final version received 4 June 2010)

Our article focuses on the likely impact of France's return to NATO's integrated military command on the future of the European security and defense policy (ESDP). First, we describe the triangular relationship between France's defense, NATO and European defense policies that dominated the era of the Gaullist–Mitterrandist consensus (1958–95) and its gradual erosion under Jacques Chirac's tenure (1995–2007). Second, we explain the context in which President Sarkozy made the decision in 2007 to rejoin the Allied military command. Relying on interviews with French foreign and defense policy-makers, we address the extent to which ESDP considerations really played a role. Finally, we develop four scenarios for the future of European defense: (1) ESDP gets a new lease of life; (2) France becomes a normal player in a NATO-dominated Europe; (3) NATO and ESDP work out of a division of labor; and (4) France becomes the Trojan horse of European cooperation inside NATO. To develop each scenario, we rely on rationalist and constructivist mechanisms drawn from International Relations theory.

Keywords: NATO; European security and defense policy; European Union; France; defense policy

Since 1966, France has had one foot in NATO and the other outside it. The country's awkward position in the alliance defined in large part the Fifth Republic's defense posture. Yet soon after the 2007 presidential election, despite a muted campaign on transatlantic issues, Nicolas Sarkozy announced the normalization of France's relations with NATO. The return to the integrated military command was made official in a letter the French president sent to the heads of state and government of the Atlantic Alliance on 19 March 2009.¹ Not surprisingly, Sarkozy's decision to rejoin the organization's military command sparked a considerable debate among political leaders and foreign policy experts. For some observers, it marks a break with the country's defense policy consensus. For others, it is a welcome move that puts an end to 15 years of hypocrisy while going some way toward repairing transatlantic relations, 5 years after the Iraq crisis. But perhaps the most trenchant criticism in France has come from those who believe that France's unconditional and full return to the Atlantic Alliance jeopardizes 50 years of efforts aimed at building an autonomous 'European defense'.

Proponents retort that France's reintegration is only a technical matter that will, paradoxically, make it easier to rejuvenate the European security and defense policy

*Corresponding author. Email: bastien.irondelle@sciences-po.fr

(ESDP). The President's gamble is that the normalization of France's position will alleviate the suspicion held in many European capitals, and most importantly in Washington, that the European defense project aims at doing away with NATO. In a way, Sarkozy would be doing exactly the opposite of what Chirac did in 1996–97 – putting NATO rather than Europe first – but with the same objective in mind: building a strong European Union (EU) in two-pillar Atlantic Alliance. As Grand (2009), a former strategic adviser to Defense Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, puts it, 'Far from being the burial of the European project, France's full involvement in NATO is a vital tool for furthering it'.

Not everybody agrees with this rosy picture, however. Critics point out that Sarkozy's initial condition for rejoining the military command – namely, substantial progress toward a common European defense – was quickly given up during the French presidency of the EU, in the fall of 2008 (Olivier 2008). For Louis Gautier, a former strategic adviser to Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, 'This is a very hard blow for *l'Europe de la défense*, which is being sacrificed' (quoted in Bretton 2009). Since 1958, when Charles de Gaulle came to power, France's threefold objective has been to reconcile national independence, transatlantic solidarity and the strategic autonomy of Europe. Successive presidents – at least until François Mitterrand – saw European autonomy as a way to balance US power in the transatlantic relationship. This was the so-called 'Gaullist–Mitterrandist consensus'. For some, inverting the order of priority by going to the USA first could be self-defeating in the long run, emasculating the EU's emerging strategic ambitions without bolstering French influence vis-à-vis Washington.

The debate on the impact of France's reintegration was and remains very Franco-French, as if the future of ESDP hinged entirely on a French decision. To some extent, this reflects a tendency to see Europe and ESDP with the very peculiar eyes of de Gaulle, those of a Europe of six founding partners dominated by France, neglecting the fact that ESDP is now a policy that belongs to 27 member states with very different strategic cultures (Meyer 2006). As former foreign minister Hubert Védrine often noted, the rest of Europe has long abandoned – if it ever adhered to – the French idea of 'Europe de la défense'. But it is true that, historically, France has played a key role in pushing the idea – if not always the concrete development – of European defense forward. So a change of mind in Paris could have tremendous implications for the fate of ESDP.

Our article focuses on the likely impact of Sarkozy's gamble on the future of ESDP. It is organized as follows. First, we briefly describe the complex triangular relationship between France's defense, NATO and European defense policies that dominated the era of the Gaullist–Mitterrandist consensus (1958–95) and its gradual erosion under Jacques Chirac's tenure (1995–2007). Second, we explain the context in which Sarkozy made the decision to rejoin the Allied military command, with specific reference to the issue of European autonomy. Relying on a series of interviews we conducted with French foreign and defense policy-makers in Paris, we also address the extent to which ESDP considerations really played a role in a move that was presented as being conditional on developments in this policy area. The core of the article then consists of four post-normalization scenarios, which we elaborate for the future of ESDP. These four scenarios are: (1) Sarkozy's gamble pays off and ESDP gets a new lease of life; (2) France becomes a normal player in a NATO-dominated Europe; (3) NATO and ESDP

workout of a division of labor; and (4) France becomes the Trojan horse of European cooperation inside NATO.

The French defense policy triangle

While France's defense policy is characterized by an ambitious – some would say hubristic – discourse on national independence and European autonomy, its alliance strategy since the birth of the Atlantic Alliance has actually alternated between two less conspicuous options: creating a European pillar *firmly* inside NATO or creating a European pillar *loosely* attached to NATO. The European security and defense identity (ESDI; 1994–97) was an instance of the former; the ESDP is an instance of the latter. In 1990–91 as in 1996–95, there was always a link between normalizing France's relations with NATO, strengthening European defense and renovating NATO (Bozo 2008, p. 5).

In a speech at the National Assembly on 8 April 2008, Prime Minister reiterated the importance of this French defense policy 'triangle'. This strategy has been implemented through various tactics. François Mitterrand's posture was that 'France will change when NATO will change' – in other words, NATO needs to change first. Jacques Chirac's own version was that 'France will move if that can change NATO'. But compare these assertions with Nicolas Sarkozy's own words: 'France moves, without pre-conditions on European defense in order to change NATO and boost European defense' (Gautier 2009, p. 135).

The Gaullist–Mitterrandist consensus was based on the idea that the US presence in Europe was an accident of history whose consequences could not be sustained forever (Bozo 2005). There would come a time when the USA would leave the continent to its own fate; the Europeans had better prepare for it. In contrast to London's attitude, which was to delay this withdrawal as long as possible by cultivating a special relationship with Washington, de Gaulle and Mitterrand thought that France should use every opportunity to hasten an inevitable event. As the continent's sole nuclear power with the strongest combat-ready military force geared for territorial defense and expeditionary warfare, France had the unique responsibility of leading the Europeans toward strategic autonomy. When they used the expression 'European defense', the French really meant it; in their view, Europe was to be able to provide for its own existential defense, independently of the USA. The discourse of 'concerted deterrence' (see the article by Stéphanie von Hlatky (2010) in this issue) is a good illustration of this view. While successive presidents insisted on French solidarity in the context of a strong Atlantic Alliance, discursive priority in the defense policy triangle was always given to national independence and European autonomy, the two terms being often interchangeable (Menon 2000).

The French vision is encapsulated in the following expression; *Europe puissance*, of which French officials never gave a precise definition. Hard to translate in English, this expression implies a global power capable of having its own foreign policy, defending its values and promoting its interests in the world (Gnesotto 1998). The project of a strategic Europe playing a key role in a multipolar world has been a perennial concern for French presidents, from de Gaulle to Chirac (Mongrenier 2005–06). *Europe puissance* is supposed to be a 'European Europe' free of US domination. It is a great power in a multipolar world able to stand up to the USA if European and American interests diverge or if European leaders disagree with

specific US policies, not only concerning climate change or world trade issues, but also in global, political and security matters. According to President Chirac, speaking in 1996, *Europe puissance* is a Europe ‘capable of defending European interests worldwide with the whole spectrum of power’. Indeed the French conception is strategic in the most traditional sense as it rests on the primacy of the military dimension in European foreign policy. To be a *Europe puissance* implies that Europe should be able to guarantee its own security and behave as a global actor in world politics, ultimately with nuclear deterrence.

Increasingly aware that she was alone in her firm support for this position, France under President Chirac came to accept a modest Europeanization of NATO on the condition that France would play a key role in a renovated alliance. Not so distant from de Gaulle’s original intent, Chirac was willing to accept some degree of NATO primacy, but with a stronger European pillar inside it. The ESDI promoted at the Berlin NATO Summit of 1994 and lukewarmly embraced by Paris was supposed to give a greater role to the long-dormant Western European Union (WEU) and grant French officers top positions in the NATO hierarchy. The ESDI project failed when it became clear that the normalization of France’s position would happen on Washington’s terms, not Paris’, and would involve little less than allowing the WEU to borrow NATO capabilities for very low-intensity operations (Delafon and Stancton 1999). One is now back to square one, except that, in the meantime, French forces have begun a pragmatic process of reintegrating the NATO command structure thanks to IFOR, SFOR and then KFOR in the Balkans.

In 1998, in a famous *volte-face* at Saint-Malo, France traded its insistence on ‘European defense’ for the UK’s acceptance of more ‘European autonomy’ (Howorth 2007). Thus ESDP, a crisis management tool that had little to do with ‘defense’, was born, giving the EU, for the first time, the role of a military actor, albeit a modest one. While the British were ambiguous on what they meant by ‘autonomy’ – most probably they meant being able to contribute substantial European capabilities to transatlantic efforts – the French also compromised their strategic ideal of *Europe puissance* for a quick political gain; for them, crisis management in the Balkans was only a step (one that was admittedly particularly well adapted to the strategic context of the 1990s) toward a full defense capability. Despite the Franco–British rapprochement, Paris still did not accept the putative division of labor whereby the EU should: (1) give the right of first refusal to NATO; (2) limit itself to low-intensity warfare (a.k.a washing the greasy dishes after a hearty meal cooked by NATO); and (3) confine ESDP actions to its European neighborhood and Africa. In other words, the French reject the US vision whereby the EU ‘needs to be able to act independently of NATO in some limited instances, especially during crises such as those in Chad or the Democratic Republic of the Congo, in which the United States does not want to get involved’ (Ghez and Larrabee 2009, p. 87).

After an initial period of institutional ESDP build-up – much influenced by Paris – that led to the creation of high-profile political-military bodies in Brussels (2000–03), the EU concentrated its efforts on conducting more than 20 crisis management operations in less than 6 years. Five of these operations were truly military: Macedonia (2003), Bosnia (2004), Chad (2008) and twice in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2003 and 2006). But, under the influence of other member states and the Council Secretariat, ESDP became increasingly civilian in character, involving anything from rule-of-law missions to border assistance, diluting the notion of a *defense* policy

cherished by the French (Jakobsen 2009). In addition, despite the hard-fought creation of the European Defense Agency in 2004, little progress was made on the issue of capabilities and defense procurement (Giegerich 2008, Witney 2008). Finally, the UK remained conspicuously aloof, making very modest contributions to ESDP operations compared to its military might and vetoing the creation of a permanent European Union Operational Headquarters. In other words, the French became increasingly disillusioned with the European defense process.

Sarkozy's gamble

This is where things stood in 2007, when Nicolas Sarkozy moved to the Elysée and announced that France would proceed to rejoin NATO's military command in the coming year. Several reasons have been offered to explain the president's decision. We focus here on structural and not psychological reasons. The first reason was a certain degree of disenchantment with what ESDP had actually accomplished, operationally, since 2003 (David 2009, pp. 435–436, Gautier 2009, pp. 109–111). A pamphlet written by *Libération's* defense correspondent, Merchet (2009a), provides a good illustration of this disenchantment with ESDP's operational value added among military experts.

A second reason was the institutional stagnation of ESDP. Some countries, notably the UK, have blocked any substantive initiative (e.g. the European headquarters) in the area of European defense for fear that it would play in the hands of those French politicians who would rather decouple Europe from the USA. Alleviating such suspicions would, perhaps, make Atlanticist members of the EU more open to French proposals for ESDP. Sarkozy and his entourage seem convinced that ESDP has reached a plateau in the pre-2007 configuration and that a new departure for ESDP requires a normalization of France's relationship with NATO.

A third reason was that French armed forces are, for all intents and purposes, already integrated in NATO structures, either in the framework of NATO missions or in ESDP missions that are subject to Berlin Plus arrangements. Indeed, despite the rhetoric, France was between 1995 and 2007 one of the biggest contributors to NATO operations in the Balkans and, to a lesser extent, in Afghanistan. In 2007, France was the fifth financial contributor to NATO with 138 million Euros, 7.5 percent of NATO's budget (Poncet *et al.* 2007). Although France did not return to command structure in 1996, she fully participated in NATO operations in Bosnia (IFOR and then SFOR 1995–2004), Kosovo (since 1999) and Macedonia (2002–03). In 2007, France deployed 1200 troops for the 36,000 strong International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and was the eighth contributor (Marc 2007). Breaking a taboo, France even put its special forces under direct US command at the beginning of the US-led operation in Afghanistan in 2001. In 2009, France was overall the fourth troop contributor to NATO operations, especially in Afghanistan (fourth ISAF troop contributor with 3400 personnel deployed) and in the Balkans (third contributor with 1500 soldiers) with almost 4900 troops on the ground (source: Etat-major des armées, April 2009).

The fourth reason is strategic. Like the UK in its 2003 White Paper, the French Government acknowledges that any future large-scale conflict will be conducted in cooperation with the USA. Here Nicolas Sarkozy's many references to the 'Western family' as a rationale for fully reintegrating the NATO military structure is not

meaningless. Behind this rationale is the idea that the Europeans should not be seen as free riders (Dumoulin 2008, p. 36, David 2009). France's substantial participation to NATO missions illustrates a new pragmatic approach that has developed over the past 15 years, which means the end of the 'religious war' with NATO. During the Prague Summit in 2002, Jacques Chirac agreed to a further rapprochement with NATO by supplying 1700 troops to the NATO Response Force and integrating 100 French officers in NATO Headquarters at Mons and Norfolk. Thus, despite the 2003 transatlantic crisis, France's attitude toward NATO is characterized by a cooperative approach illustrated by her strong engagement in NATO transformation and the Multinational Interoperability Council. The focus on interoperability shows that France under the leadership of the Ministry of Defense has put the emphasis on capabilities, notably with the Battlegroups, rather than on institutions (Bozo and Parmentier 2007). By 2007, when Sarkozy came to office, France had already become a member of all of NATO's politico-military bodies, with the exception of the Defense Planning Committee, the Nuclear Planning Group and the integrated military command. Why not put an end to a hypocritical discourse on NATO that denies France a seat at the table?

Whatever the main reason for his decision, the French president's advisors felt that the time was right to change the optics and reshuffle the European security architecture with a bold move, Sarkozy style. At first they presented France's full return to NATO as conditional upon significant progress being made with regards to ESDP. Quickly enough, however, this conditionality became much softer, yielding to the argument that France's rapprochement was a game changer through which the European defense process could be rejuvenated. The logic of conditionality that presided the French defense policy triangle under the Gaullist–Mitterrandist consensus was inverted: aiming at NATO to get Europe, rather than imposing Europe to get to NATO. In other words, there is a clear shift from reinvigorating ESDP as a necessary condition for full membership in NATO to reintegrating NATO as a way to boost ESDP (Dumoulin 2008, Pascallon 2008).

In his speech before the US Congress in November 2007, President Sarkozy continued to stress that 'the more successful we are in establishing a European defense, the more France will be resolved to resume its full role in NATO'. During the first phase of the rapprochement, until the summer of 2008, strengthening European defense appeared to be the main condition for France's reintegration. Progress toward a strategic Europe was even presented as a *pre*-condition. The chairman of the committee that drafted the 2008 Defense White Paper, Jean-Claude Mallet, argued as follows: 'My priority is to determine how the relaunch of European defense can be accomplished, and then to consider a more relaxed relationship with NATO which may lead to a rapprochement' (Mallet 2007).

Our interviews, however, suggest that, for Sarkozy, the priority was more plausibly his personal relationship with the US leader, from which the normalization of France's position in NATO followed. The future of ESDP was, at best, an afterthought. Concretely, Sarkozy announced his decision to President Bush as soon as August 2007, during a private visit to George Bush's Kennebunkport house, in which he probably posed no condition (Jauvert 2009). That said, the European rationale may have been more prevalent among the officials, like Jean-Claude Mallet, who drafted the 2008 White Paper. The Defense Minister, Hervé Morin and the Prime Minister, François

Fillon, also played an important role in emphasizing ESDP in the last stages of the rapprochement with NATO.

In any event, the fact of the matter is that European defense did not make important progress before France's reintegration. Although the French EU presidency in the fall of 2008 was supposed to be a unique opportunity to rejuvenate ESDP, the balance sheet is rather disappointing: no European headquarters, no substantive revision of the 2003 European Security Strategy and no significant breakthrough on military capabilities. Of course, the French were not helped by the economic crisis, the Georgian conflict and the Irish No on Lisbon Treaty ratification, all of which monopolized the attention during their presidency, and it is hard to imagine how they could have cajoled Gordon Brown, who had returned since 2007 to Britain's guarded position on European defense, into supporting a bold move. While the USA embraces European defense since 2007 after many years of deep suspicions, they have not managed to bring London into the fold. The official British discourse is closer to the post-Saint-Malo British line in emphasizing military capabilities, not autonomy (Howorth 2004).

Meanwhile, reintegration of the military command is proceeding apace. While Socialist and a handful of Gaullist MPs did try to oppose Sarkozy's 'unconditional surrender', Prime Minister François Fillon's call for a vote of confidence in May 2009 ensured the swift implementation of the head of state's commitment to NATO. Contrary to the expectations of those feared a replay of the 1997 ESDI debacle, French officers obtained two relatively senior positions in the command structure: the Supreme Allied Command Transformation (SACT) in Norfolk and a regional command in Lisbon. More than 900 French officers and a total of 1200 personnel are expected to move to NATO headquarters, at an estimated cost of between 400 and 650 million Euros for the period 2010–15 (Dulait and Carrère 2009, Merchet 2009b, Tertrais 2009).

So we know that France is fully reintegrating NATO, but we don't know what will happen to ESDP. The French demand for European autonomy, which has long met with a deafening silence, is now put on the back burner. It is worth noting that the leitmotiv on *Europe puissance* is not part of Nicolas Sarkozy's lexicon. References to a multipolar world with Europe as one of its poles, allied to but not aligned with the USA, are no longer part of the French narrative. It's not that Sarkozy got nothing in return for France's return; more aptly, he stopped asking in the hope that change would necessarily ensue. European conditionality has become Sarkozy's gamble (Pascallon 2008).

Four scenarios for European security and defense policy's (ESDP's) future

In this section, we propose four different scenarios regarding the likely impact of Sarkozy's gamble on ESDP.

These scenarios must be explored against the background of external factors that do not depend on France's return but may filter its impact on ESDP. The *first* of these factors is the evolution of national defense policies. EU member states have different alliance policies shaped by history and geography. For example, the UK and Poland are often put in the same Atlanticist basket, neglecting the fact that the UK supports a global security organization for NATO while Poland supports a defensive pact. This can lead to interesting shifts of position, such as when Warsaw, long

reluctant vis-à-vis European autonomy, recently decided to push for a stronger ESDP after the USA decided to scale down its ballistic missile defense project. The *second*, related factor is the evolution of the strategic context. For the moment, Afghanistan occupies most of the attention of NATO member states. This has naturally put ESDP in the marginal position of dealing with smaller operations for which the USA and European forces are stretched out. But who knows how NATO will emerge from this quagmire. *Third*, the evolution of US foreign policy, notably its attitude toward European security, including Russia, will of course be a key. Right now, Washington's policy seems to be one of benign neglect for Europe tempered by a genuine commitment to multilateralism. But given the vagaries of Washington politics it is impossible to know for sure what will be the USA's grand strategy vis-à-vis Europe for the next 15 years. *Finally*, the financial crisis and mounting public debt could have unexpected consequences: will European countries decide to rationalize their armed forces through more regional cooperation or will they be content to simply let their military forces corrode into oblivion, hoping that the USA will provide for their security? All of these factors will have an independent impact on NATO and ESDP but it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze them in detail.

Scenario 1: Sarkozy's gamble pays off

Sarkozy's gamble is based on two assumptions regarding the future of NATO. First, that France's strengthened position in the Atlantic Alliance will provide it with a leadership role in the debate concerning the main challenges facing NATO: the issue of a global NATO, the attitude toward Russia and the formulation of a new strategic concept that combines some countries' desire to expand the functional scope of NATO with others' attachment to a defensive posture. The renovation of NATO should enhance its operational capacity for expeditionary crisis management while diminishing bureaucracy and political conflict. That is the national agenda of France's return to NATO. The second assumption is that France's goodwill will convince the Americans to agree to a more balanced sharing of rights and responsibilities between Europeans and the USA, eventually leading to a two-pillar alliance in which ESDP forms one of the pillars. Punching their weight will require that the Europeans invest more in military capabilities. This would imply that Europeans raise their defense budget at least to the 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), a goal that France herself has failed to meet for many years.

If one of these assumptions fails to materialize, Sarkozy will have to explain that France rejoined a debilitated and/or US-dominated alliance. Outside NATO, France will at the very least need to convince its European partners to give a new lease of life to ESDP. The creation of a European Headquarter, the strengthening of the European Defense Agency or the launch of high-profile European procurement programs would give Sarkozy something to show for his concessions to NATO. ESDP could be presented as the tool to transform the EU into a strategic actor, able to project hard power and willing to impose its international influence. Ultimately, Europe would not depend on the USA for its security and could even develop a European nuclear deterrent. This scenario is the implementation of the 'superpower EU grand strategy' (Vennesson 2010). It gives substance to the old dream of *Europe puissance*. In Sarkozy's version of this traditional French policy, however, Europe would not necessarily

balance US power. Transatlantic cooperation would continue to flourish thanks to a more balanced partnership.

This is the French Government's official scenario. The main problem with it is that it hinges on the collective will of a large proportion of EU member states, including Germany and more problematically the UK. That is, it is based on the assumption that the NATO–EU debate is a false debate, a misunderstanding that conceals genuine agreement on the important facts of European security. Indeed, some research suggests that national strategic cultures have converged in Europe around the principles of a comprehensive, multilateral approach to crisis management (Meyer 2006). France's reintegration would make it possible to go beyond the theological opposition between NATO and the EU by focusing squarely on a tangible set of core principles that NATO and the EU share.

To some extent, France's return in NATO implements the 'leash-slipping' strategy, which consists of playing the faithful ally under unipolarity (Walt 2009). The latter poses new challenges for NATO allies in terms of the alliance security dilemma. Europeans have pursued two strategies. One was to use NATO as a pact of restraint with the aim of 'binding' their most powerful partner. Binding refers to the ability of smaller partners to use institutional ties to restrain unilateral policies and avoid entrapment with the most powerful ally. This strategy is more difficult when the power asymmetry with the USA becomes too large. Thus Europeans had little choice but to create a division of labor with the hegemon by developing regional military capabilities and cooperation (Press-Barnathan 2006). Under unipolarity, states may form an alliance or increase their cooperation not to balance or constrain the unipole but to reduce their dependence by pooling their own capabilities. The objective is not to balance but to enhance autonomy and increase room of maneuver. This strategy also aims at maintaining the status of the smaller countries as a credible and useful partner for the hegemon, which is more or less the British way of thinking about ESDP.

Scenario 2: European security and defense policy (ESDP) falls into strategic irrelevance

It is plausible that French domestic critics have it right. The last country on the continent to finally bandwagon with the USA, France would become a normal player in a US-dominated NATO and a NATO-dominated Europe. There would no longer be spokesperson for the handful of European countries that dare not expose their differences with the USA. ESDP may fall into strategic irrelevance.

This scenario would confine ESDP to a 'human security' approach of international security issues, in line with the civilian power EU grand strategy (Glasius and Kaldor 2006). At the very best, the division of labor between a high-intensity NATO and a low-intensity ESDP, with NATO keeping the right of first refusal, would be legitimated by Sarkozy's move. A division of labor between NATO and ESDP might be compatible with the scenario in which ESDP enjoyed a new lease of life, but it is still a division of labor in which the EU would depend on the USA and NATO, both politically (NATO's right of first refusal) and militarily (possible denial of access to NATO assets). At the worst, NATO would continue to develop its own civilian–military capabilities and gradually displace the EU from the niche that it invested some more effort in cultivating. In the most problematic scenario for France, the NATO–EU relationship would be organized around a reversed Berlin Plus agreement, stipulating

that NATO could use the EU's civilian instruments, capabilities and resources (Kempin 2008). As Jean-Claude Mallet argues, this is unacceptable for France: 'We do not, he wrote, want to turn the EU into the civilian agency of the Atlantic alliance' (Mallet 2008).

The bandwagoning scenario dovetails nicely with a realist approach, indicating a shift in the balance of power away from the EU and toward the US alliance. It would strengthen the free-riding behavior of many European countries. Given today's difficult budgetary situation, this scenario may even sound appealing for France. It would confirm the Euro-Atlanticism grand strategy that produces European security through American preponderance, the EU's role being that of a loyal ally and junior partner of the USA (Venesson 2010).

This scenario is also compatible with the argument that emphasizes the weight of socialization and career patterns for defense policy-makers. Since its creation, the EU has managed to attract a growing pool of military and diplomatic talents to avenue de Cortenberg in Brussels, suggesting a rise in the ESDP's symbolic power vis-à-vis NATO (Bagayoko-Penone 2006, Juncos and Pomorska 2006, Cross 2010). This was not easy, especially given the historical attraction of NATO for European military officers. Sarkozy's decision may signal that the game has moved back to Avenue Léopold III, giving momentum to the transatlantic organization. Even diplomats may begin to feel that NATO is where important decisions are made. This evolution, however, would face an important hurdle in the form of 40 years of EU foreign policy cooperation (see Scenario 4).

Scenario 3: NATO and European security and defense policy (ESDP) turned into supermarkets

Military chiefs often consider NATO less as a political organization than as a military toolbox. This is in line with the argument that France's reintegration is a pragmatic solution to a technical problem, namely the interoperability of Western armed forces. In this perspective, NATO would become a supermarket offering capabilities, expertise and more importantly coordination procedures for armed forces that need to deploy together, either in a transatlantic, an EU or an ad hoc format. ESDP would not disappear but evolve incrementally toward a permanent Berlin Plus situation, in which the EU retains the political and strategic direction for a large number of missions, but NATO becomes a forum and an enabler for the interoperability standards that these missions require. The two organizations would be truly complementary, providing different kinds of collective goods.

This scenario could be set in motion by the prospect of win-win cooperation in the face of coordination problems. In this perspective, NATO is not a political community and ESDP is not the instrument of a European political project. They are simply problem-solving institutions that are not confronted with overlapping mandates and can be shown to be flexible through informal groups of states and variable geometry modes of governance. Also compatible with the notion of a transatlantic security community, this scenario could, however, lead to free-riding problems, as NATO members decide to invest neither in NATO (letting the USA supply the capabilities) nor in ESDP (for lack of tangible benefits; Dorussen *et al.* 2009). Both perspectives dovetail well with the increasingly popular notion of European security governance, in

which different security organizations divide the labor among themselves on the basis of functional specificity.

Turning NATO and ESDP into supermarkets may be the outcome of a new French ‘hyper-pragmatism’. Since 2007, France’s posture has become increasingly inspired by the idea that ESDP is a means of increasing the EU’s international capabilities, and less by the perspective of a common defense policy. The development of European military capabilities rather than institutional design is nowadays the main driver of French policy. ‘Our guideline today, says an official, is no longer an institutional or a teleological approach. It is much more the will to strengthen concretely the military and civilian capabilities available in Europe’.² In this matter, France has become aligned with the British view of ESDP. Thus, a coalition of actors who are ‘pragmatist Europeanist’, i.e. in favor of ESDP but with pragmatic and complementary relations with NATO, seem to be joining the minority Atlanticist group of officials surrounding President Sarkozy.

The French approach to European foreign and security policy issues tends to depend more and more on complex and fluctuant ‘bilateralism’ or ‘trilateralism’ with different partners on different issues (terrorism, Mediterranean policy, ESDP institutions, industrial cooperation, military capabilities and nuclear issues). According to French leaders, this model of ‘free-floating coalitions’ would be compatible with the evolution of NATO toward a ‘multi-tier’ organization, developing ideas of ‘variable geometry’, with which France is familiar within NATO at the political level with ‘quads’ format of meeting (Noetzel and Schreer 2009). The basic trend of French policy is to be well positioned in all the coalitions and cooperation that matter in security and military issues. As a member of the Elysée’s diplomatic staff explains, ‘ESDP is a tool for French national security. If our security requires using NATO, we would use NATO, if the EU is more relevant or legitimate, we would use ESDP’.³

Scenario 4: Europeanization of NATO

Smith (2004) argues that European foreign policy cooperation has gradually deepened and expanded through an institutionalization process. From European Political Cooperation in the 1970s to the Common Foreign and Security Policy in the 1990s, he observes the formation of a system of governance that keeps strengthening itself, producing more or less binding rules for an ever larger number of states. The practice of caucusing (or EU coordination) in the United Nations attests to the increasing pervasiveness of this institutionalization logic (Luif 2003, Farrell 2006).

The idea behind the scenario is that ESDP would indeed lose its strategic importance but only because of a greater EU role inside NATO, which would become a truly European defense organization as the USA disengages or, more plausibly, a two-pillar alliance. The difference with de Gaulle’s own two-pillar vision is that the EU, not France, would make up the European pillar. Although this is not the most likely scenario, notably because France and the UK, preferring a ‘trirectoire’ with the USA, can be expected to resist it for the sake of preserving their national interest, as they do in the UN Security Council, it has some basis in the current reality. Although there is formally no CFSP with regards to NATO decision-making processes, non-EU NATO members often complain that the Europeans seem to precook their positions in an EU format before coming to NATO meetings. In a power transition landscape, whereby

the USA loses its unipolar status, France would then become the Trojan horse of European cooperation inside NATO. Its reputation as an *'empêcheur de tourner en rond'* should not be underestimated as we assess the future French role in NATO, especially if there was a change of government in Paris.

This is at least the hypothesis put forward by Heritage Foundation analysts, for whom the true meaning of France's return is to threaten NATO and Europeanize the alliance. This scenario seems unlikely, however. First, the USA has always been opposed to any form of European caucus in NATO. Second, many EU countries, including the UK, believe that their 'special relationship' with the USA is more advantageous than collective action (Shapiro and Witney 2009). Despite occasional talk of 'soft balancing', most realists acknowledge that European states will continue to prefer to bandwagon with the US hegemon (Brooks and Wohlforth 2005). The diversity of strategic cultures, notably between pacifist and interventionist states, and between nuclear powers and neutral states, will also continue to hinder EU collective action inside the alliance (Meyer 2006).

Conclusion

What does France's return mean for ESDP? The conclusion reached by two prominent US experts is that, 'contrary to the fears expressed by French critics, Sarkozy's decision does not signal the death knell of the European defense project, but just the opposite' (Ghez and Larrabee 2009, p. 89). In our view, the jury is still out. The key question is not whether ESDP will disappear, for that remains very unlikely. European defense is now strongly institutionalized as a field of interaction for European security and defense actors. The EU has become a kind of military player, notably for crisis management operations at the lower end of the intensity spectrum, alongside the United Nations and NATO. French leadership is only one of several factors that explain the creation and resilience of ESDP. The list of exogenous factors includes declining US interest in Europe, the return of war to the old continent during the Balkan crisis, a growing demand for international crisis management capabilities and the changing balance of power in Europe and beyond. Endogenous drivers include a permissive public opinion, concerns on the part of the British Government to avoid marginalization in the EU, strong pressures to rationalize the European defense industry and reduce military expenditures and habits of cooperation developed between Europeans within NATO and the WEU (Ojanen 2006, Howorth 2007, Jones 2007, Krotz 2009). The emergence of ESDP is only one part of a bigger story, namely the development of international security cooperation and post-national defense policies in Europe (Mérand 2008, Maatlary 2009, Bickerton 2010).

So the question is not whether ESDP will survive but rather, what kind of ESDP will survive? The French attitude under President Sarkozy can be characterized as a pragmatic one, based on venue shopping. It can be summarized as follows. First, ESDP and NATO are toolboxes which provide different kinds of capabilities, expertise and legitimacy depending on French objectives and alliances. Second, ESDP and NATO are complementary, which implies that a transatlantic crisis like on Iraq should not be allowed to happen again. In this sense, it would seem that France is no longer the main advocate of *Europe de la défense* as a political project of strategic autonomy. What this means is that ESDP will probably be less about flags, and more about cooperation.

If we are correct, the second and the third scenario we outlined are the most likely ones as long as transatlantic relations remain as good as they have been since Barack Obama was elected. That said, the ‘ESDP falls into strategic irrelevance’ scenario would not augur well for Nicolas Sarkozy’s domestic status as a foreign policy leader. If transatlantic discord was to resume over an issue or another, it could appear as though Sarkozy sold France’s soul for very little and opposition to France’s normalization could come back with a vengeance. In that regard, the ‘supermarket’ scenario enjoys the benefits of constructive ambiguity. It would not only suit the new French preference for flexible coalitions but also appease both Atlanticists and free riders within the EU. This scenario, however, is also premised on the assumption that there won’t be any serious divergences with the USA or within NATO (thus including non-EU member states such as Turkey) concerning international security.

Acknowledgements

This article was presented at a workshop on France’s Return to NATO, organized by the Centre for International Peace and Security Studies at Herstmonceux Castle, Essex, 12 December 2009. We thank the organizers, Stéphanie von Hlatky, Michel Fortmann and David Haglund, for the invitation. We are also grateful to David Haglund and an anonymous reviewer from *European Security* who provided extensive comments on a first version of this paper.

Notes

1. *Lettre du président de la République Nicolas Sarkozy aux chefs d’Etats et de gouvernement de l’Alliance atlantique, 19 mars 2009* [Letter from M. Nicolas Sarkozy, President of the French Republic to the Heads of State and the Heads of Government of the Atlantic Alliance, 19 March 2009].
2. Interview, Direction des affaires stratégiques, de sécurité et du désarmement, ministère des Affaires étrangères, July 2008 [Interview, Direction for Strategic Affairs, Security and Disarmament, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 24 July 2008].
3. Interview, Cellule diplomatique, Elysée, May 2009 [Interview Diplomatic Staff of the French Presidency, Elysée Palace, 18 May 2009].

Notes on contributors

Bastien Irondele is a Tenured Research Fellow in CERI-Sciences Po (Paris). He is in 2009–2010 Deakin Fellow at St Antony’s College and Research Visiting Fellow, Changing Character of War Programme, University of Oxford.

Frédéric Mérand is an Assistant Professor of Political Sciences, University of Montreal.

References

- Bagayoko-Penone, N., 2006. La socialisation institutionnelle des militaires français dans les structures décisionnelles de l’Union européenne. *Revue Française de Science Politique*, 56 (1), 49–77.
- Bickerton, C.J., 2010. Functionality in EU foreign policy: towards a new research agenda? *Journal of European integration*, 32 (2), 213–228.
- Bozo, F., 2005. *Mitterrand, la fin de la guerre froide et l’unification allemande. De Yalta à Maastricht*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

- Bozo, F., 2008. *France and NATO under Sarkozy: end of the French exception?* Paris: Fondation pour l'Innovation politique, Working Paper, March. 15.
- Bozo, F. and Parmentier, G., 2007. France and the United States: waiting for regime change. *Survival*, 49 (1), 181–198.
- Bretton, L., 2009. La France et l'OTAN, fin d'une exception ou d'une incohérence? *Reuters*, 26 February. Available from: http://www.challenges.fr/depeches/monde/20090226.REU9687/la_france_et_lotan_fin_dune_exception_ou_dune_incoheren.html [Accessed 15 February 2010].
- Brooks, S.G. and Wohlforth, W., 2005. Hard times for soft balancing. *International security*, 30 (1), 72–108.
- Cross, M.A., 2010. *Cooperation by committee: the EU military committee and the committee on the civilian crisis management*. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper #82.
- David, D., 2009. France/OTAN: la dernière marche. *Politique étrangère*, 2, 429–441.
- Delafon, G. and Stancton, T., 1999. *Dear Bill, Cher Jacques... Au Coeur de l'Elysée et de la Maison Blanche, 1995–1999*. Paris: Plon.
- Dorussen, H., Kirchner, E., and Sperling, J., 2009. Sharing the burden of collective security in the European Union. *International organization*, 63 (4), 789–810.
- Dulait, A. and Carrère, J.-L., 2009. *Projet de loi de finances 2010. Défense – Préparation et emploi des forces, Avis n 102, Commission des affaires étrangères et de la défense*. Paris: Sénat, 19 November.
- Dumoulin, A., 2008. La France et l'OTAN: vers la normalisation? *Courrier Hebdomadaire*, 2005, 5–47.
- Farrell, M., 2006. *EU representation and coordination within the United Nations*. CERI-Sciences Po. GARNET Working Paper no. 06-2006. Paris: Sciences Po.
- Gautier, L., 2009. *La défense de la France après la guerre froide*. Paris: Presses universitaires de France.
- Ghez, J. and Larrabee, S., 2009. France and NATO. *Survival*, 51 (2), 77–90.
- Giegerich, B., 2008. *European military crisis management: connecting ambitions and reality*. London: Routledge, IISS Adelphi Papers 397.
- Glasius, M. and Kaldor, M., eds., 2006. *A human security doctrine for Europe. Project, principles, practicalities*. London: Routledge.
- Gnesotto, N., 1998. *L'Europe et la puissance*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Grand, C., 2009. Sarkozy's three-way NATO bet. *Europe's World*, Autumn. Available from: <http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home/Article/tabid/191/ArticleType/ArticleView/ArticleID/21486/Default.aspx> [Accessed 15 February 2010].
- Hlatky, S. von., 2010. What, if anything, will France's reintegration imply for the alliance debate on nuclear weapons? *European security*, 19 (1), 79–96.
- Howorth, J., 2004. Discourse, ideas and epistemic communities in the European security and defense policy. *West European politics*, 27, 211–234.
- Howorth, J., 2007. *Security and defence policy in the European Union*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.
- Jakobsen, P.V., 2009. Small states, big influence. The overlooked Nordic influence on the civilian ESDP. *Journal of common market studies*, 47 (1), 81–102.
- Jauvert, V., 2009. OTAN: Révélations sur le retour de la France, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 4 April. Available from: <http://globe.blogs.nouvelobs.com/trackback/133208> [Accessed 15 February 2010].
- Jones, S., 2007. *The rise of European security cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Juncos, A. and Pomorska, K., 2006. Playing the Brussels game: strategic socialisation in the CFSP council working groups. *European integration online papers*.
- Kempin, R., 2008. Could France bring NATO and the EU closer together? *SWP comments*.
- Krotz, U., 2009. Momentum and impediments. Why Europe won't emerge as a full political actor on the world stage soon. *Journal of common market studies*, 47 (3), 555–578.
- Luif, P., 2003. *EU cohesion in the UN General Assembly*. Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, Occasional Paper no. 49.
- Maatlary, J., 2009. *European Union security dynamics*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.

- Mallet, J.-C., 2007. Les grands travaux de la défense française. *Le Monde*, 28–29 October. Available from: http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2007/10/27/les-grands-travaux-de-la-defense-francaise_971939_823448.html [Accessed 15 February 2010].
- Mallet, J.-C., 2008. Président de la Commission du Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale, «Discours d'ouverture». In: *Actes de la journée d'Etudes Le Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale, et après?* 17 September 2008, Paris. Paris: Fondation pour la Recherche Stratégique.
- Marc, H.F. et J. 2007. *Rapport d'information sur les évolutions des relations transatlantiques en matière de défense*. Paris: Assemblée nationale, Commission de la défense nationale et des forces armées, Rapport d'information n 3700, 14 Février.
- Menon, A., 2000. *France, NATO and the limits of independence, 1981–1997: the politics of ambivalence*. Houndmills, UK: MacMillan.
- Mérand, F., 2008. *European defence policy: beyond the nation state*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Merchet, J.D., 2009a. *Défense européenne, la grande illusion*. Paris: Larousse.
- Merchet, J.-D., 2009b. Retour de la France dans l'OTAN: 420 millions sur 5 ans. *Blog Secret défense*, 2 February. Available from: <http://secretdefense.blogs liberation.fr/defense/2009/02/retour-dans-lot.html> [Accessed 15 February 2010].
- Meyer, C., 2006. *The quest for a European strategic culture*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave.
- Mongrenier, J.-S., 2005–06. La diplomatie française au miroir du discours présidentiel. *Géoeconomie*, 40, 55–78.
- Noetzel, T. and Schreer, B., 2009. Does a multi-tier NATO matter? The Atlantic alliance and the process of strategic change. *International affairs*, 85 (2), 211–226.
- Ojanen, H., 2006. The EU and NATO: two competing models for a common defence policy. *Journal of common market studies*, 44 (1), 57–76.
- Olivier, H., (pseudonym of a senior civil servant) 2008. *La pleine réintégration de la France dans l'OTAN: un jeu de dupes*. Paris: Fondation Terra Nova.
- Pascallon, P., 2008. A l'heure du nouveau Livre blanc et de la présidence française de l'UE, la France doit-elle réintégrer l'OTAN? *Les Cahiers du RMES*, 5 (1), 55–76.
- Poncet, J-F., Branger, J-G., and Rouvière, A., 2007. *Rapport d'information au nom de la commission des Affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées sur l'évolution de l'OTAN*. Paris: Sénat, Rapport d'information n 405.
- Press-Barnathan, G., 2006. Managing the hegemon: NATO under unipolarity. *Security studies*, 15 (2), 271–309.
- Shapiro, R. and Witney, N., 2009. *Toward a post-American Europe. A power audit of EU–US relations*. Brussels: European Council on Foreign Relations.
- Smith, M.E., 2004. *Europe's foreign and security policy: the institutionalization of cooperation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tertrais, B., 2009. NATO at 60 – not yet a retirement age. *European Affairs*. Winter–Spring. Available from: <http://www.europeaninstitute.org/Winter/Spring-2009/nato-at-60-not-yet-retirement-age.html> [Accessed 15 February 2010].
- Vennesson, P., 2010. Competing visions for the European Union grand strategy. *European foreign affairs review*, 15 (1), 57–75.
- Walt, S., 2009. Alliances in a unipolar world. *World politics*, 61 (1), 86–120.
- Witney, N., 2008. *Re-energising Europe's security and defence policy*. London: European Council on Foreign Relations.