

Maurice Couve de Murville, Foreign Minister: France's View of the Atlantic Alliance and NATO, 1966

Speech to the French National Assembly, April 14, 1966

Even before the opening of the debate on the Government's general policy, it was clear that, to a very large extent, the National Assembly's interest would concentrate on foreign policy, that is, on the highly important decisions that have just been taken by France on the Atlantic alliance and on our country's participation in the organization known as NATO, the organization set up in the years that followed the conclusion of the Treaty of Washington in 1949 and that marked, with the Korean war, the climax of the cold war. . . . That alliance was concluded, to be sure, at a time when international conditions were quite different from what they have become. In 1949, Western Europe seemed directly threatened, and undoubtedly it actually was. Two ideological blocs—two very great powers, also—confronted each other everywhere in the world, and first of all on our continent. The European countries seemed to be the immediate stake of this confrontation. Their alliance with North America was a normal defensive reflex, just as it represented for the United States the obvious means of safeguarding some of its fundamental interests.

We then experienced many crises, the last of which, in November 1958 on Berlin, ended in 1961 with the construction of the wall that completed the brutal physical separation of the two Germanies. But at that time, and for several years already, an evolution had been evident. It had begun to change the world picture. It has continued since then, to the extent that the blocs are disintegrating, if only as a result of the Sino-Russian conflict; nuclear deterrence, which worked effectively in the Cuban crisis, now obviously plays an effective role of terror. And yet, in our view the Atlantic alliance should continue to exist, and to do so doubtless for a long time still. This is because it remains, in a still disordered world, a factor of equilibrium and consequently of peace. In man's eye, it will remain as such so long as an overall European settlement has not been reached—that is, essentially a solution to the problem of Germany—so long, in other words, as a new equilibrium has not been established in Europe, a stable one that would open the way to normal relations, that is, peaceful relations within the entire continent.

Such is the first conclusion that France has made known to her associates, by officially and publicly stating to them that she had no intention of availing herself of the clause that permits each partner, in 1969, insofar as it is concerned, to terminate the alliance; that she

intended, on the contrary, to stay in it so long as that appeared necessary, What I have just said shows that this is a question of long-term perspectives.

But what holds true for the alliance does not hold true for the Organization. That is quite another thing.

First, the one is in no way the condition for the other, even if, in current terminology, and through an ambiguity perhaps intentionally maintained, the term "NATO" covers both the alliance and the Organization, and even if some assert - perhaps, moreover, less often in recent weeks-that they are necessarily linked.

The Organization- What does that mean? Essentially it is a whole group of integrated international commands, placed unavoidably under the authority of the strongest, by far, of all the partners, which are set up in continental Europe, already functioning in peacetime, even if they - at that time have no effective responsibilities, and to which are assigned, in the event of war, the bulk of the conventional military forces- I stress conventional -stationed in the western part of the European continent, whether it concerns European forces strictly speaking or American, British and Canadian expeditionary corps.

It is obvious that an organization of this type - outside of the maintenance of those expeditionary corps-places the United States, Great Britain and Canada under no particular constraint. It is understandable that those countries accommodate themselves to it without difficulties, even if they find the corresponding expenditures heavy.

This is not at all the case for the countries on the European continent. This is the problem raised by France.

When our American and British friends and allies extol the virtues of Atlantic integration to us, it is in reality a matter of showing the advantages of a system that offers the various parties quite different situations. For it is on French soil that two of the essential NATO general headquarters are installed -the Supreme Command for Europe and the Central Europe Command, with thousands of officers, communications networks, logistics systems and constraints of all kinds that such general headquarters entail. . . .

All these installations and all this personnel benefit, by force of circumstances, from a status that is, in fact, a status of extraterritoriality. This inevitable infringement-but one that is serious by its scope-upon our sovereignty could be conceived of, at the most, in a situation of crisis, not to mention in time of war. How can it be imagined that it might become for decades, if not for generations, the normal international status for a country such as ours?

The analysis, however, does not end there. Due to the very fact of that vast implantation of general staffs, forces and resources - even, once again, if they do not actually exercise command in time of peace, and even if their main activity is then really their own maintenance - due to the very fact that this involves a system set up to take in charge in time of war, among other things and fully, the defense of France, France has the feeling

that, precisely with regard to her defense, the matter is no longer really within her competence, that she has been discharged of her essential responsibilities, and that her interest is simply to attribute to others-and it is not difficult to see what I mean - the largest possible part of the effort. . . .

I am aware that it is said repeatedly that NATO has never prevented our country from pursuing its policy in the past. France, under NATO, continued the war in Indochina, undertook the Suez expedition and conducted the Algerian war. Perhaps I might have a reservation about Suez, since neither NATO nor the United States had been consulted or warned, and when the facts were known, our American partners' reaction was swift and - I might add - effective. But, on the whole, it is true that the Atlantic Organization has been no hindrance to the action of our governments. The real problem does not lie there. It does not so much involve our being able to do what we like as it does our not being drawn into doing what we do not like. Who does not see the weight that the intermeshing, if not the integration, of general staffs and forces under the leadership of a partner infinitely more powerful than the others can bring to bear on the determination of a government, and consequently the influence that this can have in orienting its policy in a direction quite different from the one that it would have taken spontaneously? Who does not see the hazards of such a system for France's security in the event of a major conflict in which America would be involved, without France herself being so? Is that not, moreover, what our public opinion has been vaguely feeling ever since crises have been appearing-at least temporarily-no longer in our regions, but in the distant confines of the Asian continent? . . .

In reality, and barring, of course, the very special and very understandable case of Germany, Europe scarcely feels itself directly affected by the French initiatives. If Europe reacts, it is not in terms of itself, but in relation to the United States, and that is indeed the real problem.

That is the problem, for the United States occupies such an important - shall I say such a predominant-place in NATO that if one touches the Organization, one seems to take issue with the United States itself. It happens, for the same reason, that the foreign forces stationed in Europe, outside of Germany, are almost entirely American forces. Consequently we also seem to take issue with them when we say that the fate of the foreign forces is logically linked to that of the NATO installations and commands as such with regard to their presence on French soil. . . .

It is inevitable, and beneficial to all, that Europe reassume its independence with respect to America. It is inevitable that the latter conduct its policy throughout the world, and that this policy, more and more, be outside the European countries. It is inevitable that relations between East and West not remain frozen in the situation they were in fifteen years ago and that, as a result, the Russian-American rivalry decrease, at the same time as distant prospects for a peaceful and lasting European settlement come into view. Finally, it is inevitable that, in international policy, the new factors that have appeared in the past fifteen years-that is, first the mass of newly independent countries, and second

the enormous Chinese power-make their action increasingly felt and that the Atlantic alliance be transformed by this.

These are the prospects within which France's decisions on NATO should be placed. Far from being, as is claimed, naively lingering in the past; these are the prospects of the future. France is in the mainstream of world policy, she is moving in the direction of history, and that is why she is working for peace in the end.