

FROM ATLANTIC EUROPE TO EUROPEAN EUROPE

Balancing and networking in Cold War and contemporary Europe

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This article shows how strategic thinking in the early Cold War-era France, Germany and The United Kingdom resulted in a continent that in strategic terms became dominated by its Atlantic ally, the United States. Furthermore, it describes how this 'Atlantic Europe' triumphed over attempts to establish a 'European Europe'. Today, more than two decades after the end of the Cold War we seem to be moving into a new Cold War-esque situation. This gives Europe the opportunity (if not the responsibility) to become a strategic power in and of itself, instead of relying heavily on the United States. In doing so, a truly European Europe would be established.

INTRODUCTION

We tend to take our history for granted. We accept that history has played out as it has, which is a very natural response. However, because we cannot change the past, we sometimes view history as if it could not have been very different. After the fall of Nazi Germany, the two large allied forces turned on each other and divided the once powerful and independent European continent. Because this is such an important part of our political history, we forget that it could have been completely different. This paper aims to explain how Western Europe could have become its own major power, but instead chose to align itself with the United States. Europe became Atlantic, instead of solely European. In doing so, this article introduces two concepts, that of the Atlantic Europe and the European Europe. The latter refers to Western Europe being dominated by its relationship with its Atlantic ally, the United States. The former refers to a counterfactual Europe, which could have evolved into a unified great power, independent from the United States. The current trend of Russian aggression, in combination with the prospect of an American pivot towards Asia, gives this counterfactual practical relevance.

First, this paper will describe how three key European states experienced the institutionalisation of American hegemony in Europe. Second, it examines whether these states had any other good alternatives to their compliance with this hegemonic power. Then, this paper argues that these European states could have opted to counterbalance against the United States and outlines the necessary actions for such a world to arise. By doing so, we can better appreciate the dynamic and results of strategic decisions. Finally, this paper reflects on Atlantic and Euro-centric strategic power in Europe in the current Cold War renaissance.

UNITED KINGDOM: FRIENDS WITH NUCLEAR BENEFITS

The decline of European power in world affairs had become painfully clear with the Suez Crisis of 1956. After the nationalization of the Suez Canal, French, British and Israeli forces attacked Egypt in unison. This unintentionally put the United States in a very awkward position. The United States feared that if it were to allow the British and French to continue their colonial policies, new independent countries in Africa and Asia would switch sides to the Soviet Union (Warner, 1991). In addition to this, the Americans could not easily condemn the invasion of Hungary by Warsaw Pact forces while allowing the British and French to invade Egypt (Nixon in Pillar, 2014). So, in order to decry communist aggression, the United States had to halt the invasion of Egypt as well, and it did. Under threat of serious financial sanctions by the Americans, and a subsequent oil boycott from Saudi Arabia (with support from the United States), the British (followed by the French) decided to cease fire (Ellis, 2013; Love, 1969).

The Suez Crisis made it painfully clear that the US had become dominant over the British and French. As Christopher Layne put it clearly, “Forced into humiliating retreat from the Suez Canal by US economic coercion, Britain (...) abandoned its claim to great power status and opted instead to maintain influence with Washington through the Anglo-American ‘special relationship’” (Layne, 2006, p. 97). This special relationship, as David Reynolds points out, is not a friendship beginning in 1956. Lord Robert Ciel highlighted the importance of the Anglo-American relationship when he, in 1917, stated that if the Americans were to accept the British view of international relations over the ‘Continental’ view, the British perspective would become dominant. The special relationship started out as a diplomatic ploy to wield American power for British ends (Reynolds, 1985-6). The Suez Crisis did not mark the beginning of the relationship, but a new order in the relationship. Now, for the first time, the British accepted that they had lost control over the Americans and that they would be controlled by Washington from now on. In this sense, the notion that the British were Greece to America’s Rome had become true in more than one meaning. Not only did the British provide the foundation, they also became part of their pupil’s empire (Macmillan in Reynolds, 1985-6).

FRANCE: GRANDEUR OR MINEUR

For France, the Suez Crisis was only one of many humiliating defeats of the war and post-war period. The French had been occupied by their neighbour during the Second World War, and had

subsequently been ignored by the British, Americans and Russians in their Yalta meetings. After the war, the French lost many of their colonies and experienced a hard fought war in Indochina. The accumulated degradation of French grandeur had reached a tipping point in 1958 with the war over French Algeria. That year, the Fourth French Republic fell due to the national government's inability to cope with revolts in Algiers, and the invasion of Corsica by French Algerian troops. The civil government had lost control over the army, which was seriously discussing landing paratroops in Paris and performing a coup d'état (Crozier & Mansell, 1960). In a (successful) attempt to avert an all out civil war, parliament elected General De Gaulle¹ as prime minister and asked him to form a new government. The new government was able to regain control over the army, and introduced a new constitution that overhauled the political system and established the Fifth French Republic of which De Gaulle would be elected president later that year (BBC News, 1958).

De Gaulle wanted to regain the French grandeur and to show that France was still relevant on the world stage. As a nationalist, he refused to let either NATO or the European Community overshadow French independence. He abandoned European plans for a common defence and foreign policy and detached France from the integrated NATO military structure (Layne, 2006). To re-establish French importance, he created the *force de frappe*, the French nuclear force which made sure that France was protected against aggressors without relying on American goodwill. Even though De Gaulle could, by most standards, be considered a nationalist, he saw the importance of European cooperation for the future of France. He formed one half of the Franco-German tandem, a friendship between former enemies in the heartland of the continent (Layne, 2006). Whereas the British had surrendered their former power status to the American hegemony, Gaullist France refused to become a satellite state.

This is key in understanding how the French and the British ended up in completely different extremes while dealing with similar problems of national security: They aligned themselves very differently. The reason for this is twofold. First, the French did not have the option to fall back on a special relationship as the British could with the United States. As a result, the French had to either rely on their own strength to remain powerful, or give up on their Gaullist dreams. Second, the British had two advantages over the French in their defence against Russian aggression. Any invasion by the Warsaw Pact with conventional forces would presumably start in Germany before heading westbound (Rasmussen, 1978). Whereas the United Kingdom is separated from Germany by the low countries and the Channel, France lies directly adjacent to Germany. This means that the British would have more opportunities to stall Warsaw Pact forces than the French would. However, it is the unconventional force that proves to be of utmost importance. The Americans provided the British, but not the French, with nuclear weapons. In doing so, the British could rely on themselves to hit the red button, while the French had to rely on the Americans to do so. It is not hard to understand that someone like De Gaulle would not accept such strategic dependence.

1 As general, De Gaulle liberated France in 1944 and subsequently led the provisional government from 1944 to 1946.

GERMANY: ANOTHER SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

What De Gaulle had become for France, Konrad Adenauer had become for the Deutsche Bundesrepublik, a strong leader that reminded the world that Germany was still relevant². It was when Germany and France were moving towards each other to form their own kind of 'special relationship', that the Germans were confronted with the United States which were not keen on challenges to their hegemonic position.

As said, De Gaulle had both nationalistic and European ambitions. Part of his European ambitions was to build a strong, independent, continental bloc, centred around a Franco-German axis. The 1963 Franco-German Élysée Treaty, which formed the very basis of this ambition, was seen as a dangerous development by the Americans. By creating their own power bloc, the continental Europeans were basically counterbalancing the American-led NATO bloc (Layne, 2006). The Americans tried to keep a firm grip on the continent by trying to get the UK to join the common market. This plan failed because De Gaulle concluded that the British were an American Trojan horse in Europe (Trachtenberg, 1999). The fear of losing the continent to a French-German bloc, independent of NATO and with its own nuclear force urged President Kennedy to take action. The United States made it very clear that the Germans could not have cake and eat it too. Either the Germans chose for the Americans, and accepted American leadership, or they would choose partnership with France and lose American protection. To make this consideration more mathematical, foreign secretary Rusk stated eloquently that the French only had 50 nuclear warheads versus America's 5.000 (Trachtenberg, 1999). However, one can agree with the Gaullist view that nuclear deterrence is not so much about the sheer number of bombs, but rather about the credibility that these bombs would be used as a deterrent (Gallois, 1963). So, to further persuade the Germans to abandon the French, the Americans undermined Adenauer's position at home and did so with success. The Atlanticists in Bonn forced very fundamental alterations in the Franco-German Élysée Treaty, and Adenauer was succeeded by the more pro-Atlantic Ludwig Erhard later that year (Trachtenberg, 1999).

The United States secured its hegemonic status by strong-arming the British into the junior position of the special relationship and by breaking up the European bloc via Germany. France itself stayed defiant, but alone.

ANY OTHER WAY?

The question now is whether these diminished powers had the opportunity to take a radical different direction? Or, in other words, could we envision a history in which these three countries could end up with a European Europe instead of an Atlantic one, while still acting within the logic of their own national interest?

This article argues that this would not be possible as long as these countries acted individually. This argument will be supported by outlining how the chain of events that led to the Atlantic Eu-

² Author Charles Williams even went so far as to title his biography on the Chancellor 'Adenauer: Father of the New Germany'.

rope was entirely logical within their individual national interests. However, it will also demonstrate how Europe could have become European if the three countries had acted as a bloc, instead of as individual countries.

The British could not ignore their failure during the Suez Crisis and had to rethink their position in the world. By continuing the special relationship with their Atlantic neighbours, the British could still play a significant role as second-in-command. Breaking away from the US would mean that the UK would become a lonely semi-power, caught between the two superpowers.

With respect to France, it is difficult to criticise De Gaulle's intentions because his search for security and relevance through nuclear deterrence is nothing less than logical and the same as American and British ambitions (Gallois, 1963). The French ambition to create a European strategic bloc was also understandable. By sharing the tandem with Germany, France would be co-directing half of the continent, a much larger share than it could have done alone. Seeking independence from the United States was also fairly logical, since the French could not simply rely on the Americans alone (and even if they could, it would be another humiliation to go from world power to protectorate).

Adenauer's effort to become the other side of the tandem was also sensible. There could be no way for the Germans to be a relevant force in Europe without the aid of another state. Everyone on the continent was still suspicious of the central European powerhouse, trying to be a relevant power would presumably spook the entire northern hemisphere. Also, by having the possibility to choose between the French and the Americans, the Germans had a possibility to play two forces against one another in order to get the best out of each option. The fact that Germany eventually chose for the United States is not only fair, but mostly due to domestic electoral politics (Trachtenberg, 1999).

JUMPING OFF THE BANDWAGON TOGETHER

As mentioned earlier, the argument extends beyond the individual logic of national interest. Yes, each individual state did what it had to do to achieve its goals (mostly national security and relevance on the world stage). Furthermore, each state was too weak to be able to counterbalance the United States and the Soviet Union. However, together, they could have. By acting as a bloc, and operating in accordance with one another, the three countries could have kept the United States out of European politics. Three different choices should have been made differently.

First, the British should have considered not becoming America's *secondant* but seeking power by alignment with other European powers. In the Anglo-American relation, Britain is in the back seat. In the European Community Britain could have been in the front seat with the French and the Germans. This seems like an un-British place to be, seeing that the British often associate themselves with the Americans and more often than not complain about the European Union. But this also has to do with the second point: De Gaulle should have offered the British the chance to choose between the back seat of the American car, or the front seat of the European vehicle. Alas, De Gaulle, afraid of the Anglo-Americans infiltrating Europe, vetoed the British out of the continent (BBC, 1967). Third, and most complicated, electoral politics within Germany itself had to result in a win for Adenauer and the pro-Europeans, instead of for Erhard and the pro-Atlan-

tics, as to result in the successful establishment of the French-German Élysée Treaty.

These adjustments are by no standard insignificant. However, they serve as profoundly interesting tweaks within counterfactual argumentation. In other words, imagine the results of these counterfactual alterations. Europe would have become a third world power, both counterbalancing the United States and the Soviet Union. The political direction Europe would have moved in would be extremely hard to predict, but it would be clear that the Cold War would have looked very different.

CONTEMPORARY POWER SHIFTS

This exercise in abstract counterfactuals has very practical and contemporary applications. In the case of this article, it helps us understand how Europe relates to the United States, and its very own potential in strategic matters. Today, at the start of a new Cold War-esque period, this understanding is all the more relevant.

For the past few years, The United States had made its intentions clear to pivot towards Asia, with the added result of a diminished focus on Europe (Clinton, 2011). Though the Ukrainian Crisis has slowed down this movement, it is unsure whether or not the trend will be reversed. The growth of Asia, the proximity of Latin America and outright drama in the Middle East seem to be much more interesting to the United States than Europe seems (Moisi, 2013). In addition to this, Washington has complained many times that its NATO allies failed to commit the necessary capital to the alliance (Shanker, 2011). If such frustrations persist, it could result in the United States pulling out of Europe in an attempt to pressure them in taking their defence in their own hands.

NATO maintains a 2% rule, stating that each member state ought to spend 2% of their budget on defence (Hasik, 2014). In the period 1990-1994, the European NATO members spend an average of 2.5% of their GDP on defence. In the second half of that same decade, it declined to 2.1%, still at par with the agreed 2% rule. Between 2011 and 2013, the average for European countries decreased to 1.6% (NATO, 2014).

However, it seems that Europe is finally changing this trend. A 2015 rapport by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute noted that a large number of European countries did indeed increase their defence spending. However, only Poland and Lithuania (with defence spending increases of 20% and 50% respectively) will be able to meet the 2% benchmark. Most other European countries that in fact do increase their spending only do so with a few per cent, hardly enough to reach the 2% minimum (Perlo-Freeman & Wezeman, 2015).

But as Russian and American attitudes and actions change, so do those of the three European countries. Both the Ukrainian Crisis and the Asian Pivot leave Europe with the responsibility to protect itself for the first time in decades. The question that faces us now is whether the French, Germans and British are willing and able to do so. In what follows, the article explores the current and future trends in the international assertiveness of these three countries.

First, the United Kingdom: As Ko Colijn, head of the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, has recently noted, the British are at risk of becoming even less relevant in the coming decades (Colijn, 2015). The British rely too much on their special relationship with the United States and are paving the way for a Brexit: a British departure from the European Union. Sadly, this is just

where the Americans need the British to be in order to be useful for Washington. As De Gaulle noted half a decade ago, the British would be an American Trojan Horse in Brussels. If the Trojan Horse were to leave Brussels, it would be much less valuable for the Americans. President Barack Obama stressed this very same aspect of the American-British relationship in June 2015, when he noted that “one of the great values of having the United Kingdom in the European Union is its leadership and strength on a whole host of global challenges. And so we very much are looking forward to the United Kingdom staying a part of the European Union” (Obama, 2015). This very diplomatic sounding remark was all the more noteworthy as it was part of a press conference that had absolutely nothing to do with the British membership of the European Union or even the European Union in general. It is a testimony of the sometimes paradoxical nature of politics: only by choosing for Europe, Britain can choose for the Atlantic.

Second, there is the case of France. Although usually portrayed as being a half of the Franco-German tandem that drives the European Union, France has been losing relevance quickly. France suffered from the euro crisis, its economy is stagnating and it has serious problems with keeping its budget in check according to EU guidelines (Pabst, 2014; Steinhauser, Dalton, & Fidler, 2014). On a political level, two trends damage the impact of France in Europe. The first being the unpopularity of the current president, Francois Hollande. The second being the popularity of the anti-European *Front National*.

A case for French power still can be made. Virtually all European countries have suffered hardship during the euro crisis and unpopular leaders who struggle with anti-European populists are common throughout the continent. In the meantime, France is more militarily active than other nations are, with Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic and Ivory Coast being good examples (Bender, 2015). But these factors do not make France a powerful actor within Europe itself, chiefly because of how well neighbouring Germany is doing in comparison. And however strong France may be in Africa, it hardly translates into more influence on the European continent.

Germany has become quite the opposite of France. It has a fairly strong economy, a leader with a very high approval rating, and it lacks a strong populist and anti-European movement as embodied by the *Front National* in France³. Whereas it was the weakest of the major European powers half a century ago, it is now the most powerful, and in many ways the leader of Europe (Mishra, 2014). However, many have pointed out that Germany, being self-conscious about its past, is reluctant to accept a true leadership role on the continent. It has limited its hegemony to more economic affairs, in particular maintaining fiscal responsibility in the eurozone (Bulmer & Paterson, 2013).

The role of Germany in the Western reaction to the Ukraine crisis has been very interesting and rather peculiar. On the one hand, Berlin is taking the leadership position with regard to the Western front against Russia (Speck, 2015). On the other hand, Germany has a more balanced view regarding sanctions than other nations have. Berlin insists on negotiations as a method of de-escalation (Pond & Kundnani, 2015). Meanwhile, Speck points out that the German approach does not include a ‘military dimension’, which has very serious implications for the diplomatic

³ The German eurosceptic party *Alternative für Deutschland* is a minor party. It failed to gain a seat in the Bundestag and it came in fifth in the 2014 European Elections. The *Front National* came in first in that same election in France.

stance that Germany can afford to take against Russia (Speck, 2015). In other words, it is doubtful whether any diplomatic revolve would be very durable without any kind of credible military back-up, especially when dealing with a military aggressive opponent like Russia.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to point out how the Atlantic nature of power in post-war Europe was not a given, but is the result of very careful deliberations and strategic planning of all major powers involved. It also tried to make a counterfactual argument to show how Europe would be a major power in and of itself, similar to the United States and Russia if the European powers at the time decided to stick together, instead of letting themselves be played against one another. The value of this is that it shows the relationship between Atlantic and Euro-centric strategic thinking in Europe by the major powers. This is all the more important now the United States aims to pivot out of Europe and into Asia, while Russian aggression is endangering peace and stability on the European continent.

Today, Germany, again, is the powerbroker and kingmaker of Europe. Five decades ago, it aligned itself with the United States, rather than France, and in effect created an Atlantic Europe, instead of a European Europe. Today, it stands in front of a similar crossroad. By fully accepting leadership and standing up to Russia, it can (possibly) unify European strategic power. If it feels too reluctant it will pass the buck of standing up to Russia to Poland, which is perhaps the strongest anti-Russian force in the European Union (Nougayrède, 2015). By doing so, it maintains all economic power in Germany, but leaves all the European strategic and geopolitical affairs in limbo. This will not result in an Atlantic or a European Europe, it will only make the continent weaker and less in control over its own future. Then, the Atlantic Europe, weak but with a bodyguard, is still better than an un-European Europe, which would be: weak, with no one to stand up for it.

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