

# **“Europeanising” NATO: a pipedream or an obvious necessity for Europeans?**

## **1. Introduction**

European misconceptions over the relationship between the USA and NATO are commonplace: there is an unfortunate tendency to confuse US defence structures with NATO. There are many reasons why Europeans in general, and the French in particular, fail to understand the true nature of the relationship.

In the first instance, many of them have forgotten the circumstances and the context prevailing at the time when NATO was established and are ignorant of the ambiguities arising as a result. In addition, unconsciously or not, they seem incapable of seeing the bigger picture and of recognising that the world’s geostrategic centre has shifted from Europe to the Asia-Pacific region. They also fail to realise that America’s worldview has changed, that its historical links with Europe are waning and are ill informed about the true nature of US international defence structures.

It is therefore time that we took a new look at these different issues and considered how the Europeans could rethink their own relationship with NATO, envisage adopting a new stance within the Alliance that would enable them to be less vulnerable to outside contingencies and better defend their own interests.

## **2. Backdrop**

The end of WWII left western European countries in a state of financial ruin and their defence systems in tatters. They had little option but to ask the United States to maintain its military presence in Europe to protect them from the threat represented by the Soviet Union.

Subsequently, in 1948, the British raised the need for a “treaty of alliance and mutual assistance”, a defensive alliance and regional grouping of partners on both sides of the North Atlantic to be established within the framework of the UN Charter. This proposal culminated in the signature of the North Atlantic Treaty in Washington on 4 April 1949.

Within the new transatlantic alliance, the principal decision-making body was the North Atlantic Council (NAC) for which provision was made in the treaty. It comprised the Heads of State and Government of the 12 founding countries<sup>1</sup>. In turn, the Council decided to set up a number of permanent institutions, a decision officialised by the Paris Protocol signed on 28 August 1952 on the “Status of International Military Headquarters set up pursuant to the North Atlantic Treaty”, all these institutions then going to make up the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

For 15 years from 1951, France hosted the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) and, from 1952, NATO Headquarters were located in Paris. This situation, continued until 1966 when General de Gaulle decided to withdraw France from the integrated military command structure.

---

<sup>1</sup> Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Iceland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, United Kingdom, United States

### **3. Constructive ambiguities**

From the outset, there seems to have been some confusion about the way in which the burden of responsibilities should be shared, if only because of major disparities between American and European military capabilities. For the United States, in the aftermath of WWII, its major contribution to NATO was the economic support afforded by the Marshall Plan in aiding the Europeans to begin their post-war recovery. The Europeans, for their part, gradually came to consider that the uneven distribution of military capabilities was fair compensation for having agreed to abandon any notions of leadership and accepting their relative dependency on the Americans for their security.

In 1956, however, the Suez crisis had major impact on relations between the Allies. When Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal in Egypt, France and the United Kingdom launched a combined joint military operation to regain control. The success of this operation was immediately damped by the attitudes of the two nuclear powers of the time who were in favour of decolonialisation. In the face of barely concealed threats from the Soviet Union and the deafening silence of the Americans, reactions in the United Kingdom and France were diametrically opposed.

To preclude further such surprises from the Americans, the UK decided to strengthen its transatlantic ties in the hope of being able to exert a pre-emptive influence on US decision-making processes and ensure continued American commitment to Europe.

By contrast, General de Gaulle, who had misgivings about the US security guarantee, decided that it would be the last time that France would allow itself to be threatened by any of the nuclear powers. Ten years later, this decision culminated in France's withdrawal from the NATO integrated military command structure and in the allied troops being asked to depart from the country to leave France free to develop its own nuclear military programme. France then embarked on the major task of creating its own nuclear deterrent. This had the welcome side effect of boosting the entire national economy, lessening French dependency on others for its power supplies through its nuclear power plants and developing a world-class industrial and technological defence base. In the process, France made its intention of being independent of its American ally perfectly clear and began to promote the principle of European defence. These moves did not, however, preclude it from remaining a loyal but demanding partner within the Atlantic Alliance.

Until 2009, when France opted to rejoin the NATO command structure, its allies harboured concerns about its ambiguous attitudes towards NATO.

### **4. New geostrategic centre of gravity**

During the Cold War period, the Soviet Union was the USA's strategic rival, and the battlefield was Europe. This is no longer true today. Russia, whose GDP is only slightly superior to that of Italy, is no match for the United States. But it remains a nuclear power with an arsenal that should not be underestimated, not least because of its use of these capabilities to intimidate its adversaries and threaten international order. Russia's imperialist tendencies have once more surfaced putting pressure on its neighbours, empires having no borders but only battlefronts.

Today, China is the main strategic rival of the United States in all respects. China has already announced its target of being the world's leading power in 2049, the year in which the People's Republic of China (PRC) will celebrate its centenary. Unlike countries in the West, which are always in a hurry, China has adopted a long-term strategy<sup>2</sup>, applying the principle recommended by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War* of "appearing weak when strong to take the enemy by surprise". Conscious of China's intentions, the Obama administration acknowledged the shift in the world's geostrategic centre of gravity towards the East through its "Pivot to Asia" policy.

To understand America's current position in relation to Europe, we need to think out of the European box and see things from an American perspective. The United States is a true world power, a continent country surrounded by friendly neighbours, the protection offered by two oceans, and interests and allies across the globe.

Europeans are often the victims of what could be called the "Mercator bias", in other words, the tendency of people in the West to represent the world as a planisphere or a map of the world based on the Mercator projection (in which a spherical surface is projected onto a plane surface) with the Greenwich meridian at 0° longitude in the middle of the map and the dateline at its outside edges, and this for practical reasons. This worldview remains very common in Europe and continues to delude us into thinking that we are still at the centre of the world and, by extension, important to other countries, not least our American allies. This could not be further from the truth.

## 5. United States defence organisation

For a better understanding of American attitudes to defence, security and foreign policy, we need to consider its military power factor<sup>3</sup>. America's defence organisation enables it to project its military power anywhere in the world. With nearly three million active-duty military personnel, reservists and civilians, and the world's largest defence budget of 886 billion USD<sup>4</sup>, the US Department of Defence consists of six services: *Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guards, Air Force and Space Force*. As in most modern Western armed forces, these services are responsible for preparing, recruiting, equipping, and training forces in various environments (land, air, sea and space). Under the authority of the President of the United States and the Secretary of Defence, responsibility for their operational employment lies with an operational military commander.

In France, this role is incumbent on the Chief of Defence Staff (CEMA). In the United States, the supreme military authority is the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), who is the chief military adviser to the President but has no direct operational responsibilities. Responsibilities with regard to employment of military

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Hundred-Year Marathon" by Michael Pillsbury published in 2015 by Saint Martin's Griffin, USA

<sup>3</sup> Western military doctrine is generally based on four main power factors: diplomatic, information, military, economic.

<sup>4</sup> Record defence budget approved by Congress in December 2023

forces are shared by 11 strategic Combatant Commands (COCOM), 6 of which are regional<sup>5</sup> and 5 functional<sup>6</sup> in character. As a result, it is as though the United States had 11 Chiefs of Staff to command and control operations across the world. Each COCOM is responsible at strategic level for joint military operations in its geographical area or functional domain. For this, it can call on the military forces of the various services assigned or apportioned to it following a complex force generation process, which is decided at national level by the Pentagon.

## 6. NATO today

NATO is a political and military organisation that is made up of civilian agencies and military commands. Politically, its decision-making authority is the North Atlantic Council. The Heads of State and Government meet in person at NATO Summits. The rest of the time they are permanently represented by their ambassadors or their ministers at meetings on specific issues (defence, foreign affairs). The Council is presided over by the NATO Secretary General (Jens Stoltenberg for the last 10 years), named by consensus by the Allied Nations. He is supported by an international staff that assists him in preparing and implementing Council decisions. For military issues, a Military Committee made up of the allied Chiefs of Defence Staff, the executive body of which is the International Military Staff (IMS), is responsible for supervision of the military command structure. This latter consists of two strategic commands: ACO (*Allied Command Operations*) for operations in Europe and ACT (*Allied Command Transformation*) for preparing future operations.

Since France rejoined the NATO command structure in 2009, the other Supreme Allied Commander role previously entrusted to an American admiral (SACLANT – *Supreme Allied Commander - Atlantic*) has been transferred to a European, a French general or admiral, whose title is now SACT (*Supreme Allied Commander Transformation*). This Supreme Allied Commander is based in Norfolk (Virginia) in the USA by contrast with SACEUR (*Supreme Allied Commander – Europe*), who is a senior American general or admiral based in Mons (Belgium) and in charge of current NATO operations. SACT is responsible for forward planning, in other words for future operations. It is under his authority that issues relating to strategic analysis, foresight, capability development, relations with industry, innovation, interoperability, training and doctrine are addressed.

**NATO has no military resources of its own**, with the exception of a few AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft and a number of large surveillance drones. Its added value lies in its ability to offer its members and partners a permanent command structure (staffs and command & communications systems) to afford them maximum reactivity and ensure the interoperability of the allied military forces when conducting military operations on behalf of the Alliance, whenever decisions to this effect are made at political level. The

---

<sup>5</sup> Combatant Commands for North America (NORTHCOM), South America (SOUTHCOM), Central Asia and the Middle East (CENTCOM), Europe (EUCOM), Africa (AFRICOM), the Indo-Pacific (INDOPACOM)

<sup>6</sup> Strategic nuclear (STRATCOM), logistics and transportation (TRANSCOM), cyberdefence (CYBERCOM), space (SPACECOM), special operations (SOCOM)

necessary resources (personnel, equipment) are provided by the individual countries. NATO's military strength is the sum total of the armed forces of the Allies operating together.

While the United States is the strongest player in the Alliance, it is important to compare like with like. America's military resources have been designed to cater to two world wars at the same time, on the Indo-Pacific front and in European theatres, whereas the European armed forces focus essentially on European defence.

As has already been mentioned, it is a senior American military officer who has the role of SACEUR and who also, and more particularly, commands the American troops permanently stationed or deployed at EUCOM in Europe, which is headquartered in Stuttgart (Germany). This general is therefore answerable to two different authorities, the first being American, namely the Secretary of Defence and the President of the United States, for his activities as COM EUCOM. Within NATO, by contrast, he is accountable in his SACEUR functions to the North Atlantic Council (NAC) that is made up of the 32 Heads of State and Government of the Allied nations, or their representatives.

## **7. Alliance or coalition?**

With its defence systems dotted across the globe, the United States clearly has no need of NATO to wage war and defend its interests on a global scale. In addition, since the war in Kosovo where the Americans were particularly shocked by the complex and time-consuming procedures required by the NAC to agree on aerial targets (largely because of a French veto due to differences of appreciation over the validity of some of these targets), they have been completely open about their preference for a "Coalition of the Willings" solution. It is much easier to handle than to obtain a consensus in the NAC. Yet the two approaches, though different, each have their advantages and disadvantages and are therefore complementary. Coalitions can more easily be formed but are more fragile, whilst alliances are synonymous with slower decisions but are more robust. If truth be known, coalitions are always based on the lowest common denominator of short-term interests with the result that any one of the partners may suddenly decide to pull out without notice. Conversely, while consensuses within alliances may take longer to obtain, they have the advantage of being the result of lengthy reflections and represent a stronger and potentially more sustainable commitment.

The Europeans need an alliance since no single country is in a position to defend itself or conduct large scale military operations in the event of an international crisis. The Americans have no need for a military alliance, or at least not to the same extent. They therefore favour coalitions which, for them, are a way of reinforcing the political legitimacy of their military engagements without sacrificing flexibility and time. Moreover, if a member of a coalition or a partner decides to withdraw, the United States will usually replace the personnel or equipment previously provided by the outgoing party from its own military capabilities. This is something beyond the scope of the European countries.

The American general, SACEUR, is a military officer who is well respected and much admired in Europe. It is only right that he should hold this position, given the military capabilities contributed by his country. But what the Europeans fail to understand is that he is also the Commander of the US forces in Europe (COM

EUCOM). He spends most of his time at his American headquarters in Stuttgart or on visits to the individual countries in his area of responsibility. He only spends an average of one day a week at his NATO base at SHAPE in Mons, a factor of which we need to be aware.

The fact of the matter is that, in the event of war in Europe, only a small part of the American troops would be commanded by SACEUR, and thereby under NATO control. We would probably find ourselves in a situation where there would be two parallel operations, as in all recent theatres of operations, for example in Afghanistan, in Libya or in Iraq, namely one led by NATO and another by the Americans not bound by the conditions of the Alliance (*caveats*, vetoes, etc.). And in the event of NATO refusing to take action or taking too long to make up its mind, the coalition led by the United States would be able to go ahead without delay by virtue of its different rules of engagement and faster decision-making procedures. It would be an illusion to imagine that all the American forces could come under the exclusive control of the NAC. For American military personnel engaged in operations, NATO or a coalition are nothing more than the combined forces of the other partners, who may even be under their command. Intellectually the American troops see themselves as something quite separate, given the much larger scale of their national defence organisation.

Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, to which the Europeans are so attached, offers no guarantee of automatic American engagement. Should one of the members of the Alliance be threatened by an aggressor, there would have to be a unanimous vote in the NAC for this article to be enforced. Furthermore, unlike its European equivalent, Article 42-7 on solidarity and mutual defence<sup>7</sup>, Article 5 contains no obligations with regard to the resources to be provided by the Allies. The only time that a vote has been staged on this article was at the request of the then NATO Secretary General, Lord George Robertson, not at the behest of the United States, following the terrorist attacks on the *World Trade Center* in New York on 11 September 2001. The Allies unanimously approved application of Article 5 in support of the United States in the wake of the Al Qaeda strikes on American soil.

The Americans know little about and have no need for NATO. In fact, most American military personnel have served in Asia, not in Europe. They have frequently been deployed in operations in Central Asia (Afghanistan, Pakistan) or the Middle East (Iraq, Syria). Many of them have been stationed in the Gulf States where postings tend to be more frequent, or in Southeast Asia (Japan, Republic of Korea). On the political front in Washington, only a handful of people have traditionally been employed on NATO and European issues at the Pentagon, the Department of State and the White House (National Security Council). Their number has doubtless risen with the war in Ukraine but, basically, the situation has little changed.

## 8. The United States and NATO

In Europe, and even in the rest of the world, most countries assimilate NATO with the United States, because of the country's political predominance and its enormous relative weight within the organisation in military terms. But the relationship between the United States and NATO is, in truth, quite different. The European

---

<sup>7</sup> The mutual defence clause (Article 42, § 7 of the Treaty on European Union) states that, "in the event of a Member State being the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power, in accordance with Article 51 of the United Nations Charter".



countries see NATO as a vast umbrella organisation that is bigger than they are, while the Americans see it as a regional organisation nowhere nearly as big and imposing as its own defence structures.

And what of the situation today? The strategic interests and values that we largely shared during the Cold War are fast becoming a thing of the past. Since the Bush Junior administration, America's politicians have been regularly reminding the Europeans that, where security is concerned, "free riders"<sup>8</sup> are increasingly unpopular with the American taxpayer. Over the last 75 years, there have been major changes in the physiognomy of the American population. During the Cold War, American politicians often had close ties with Europe either because of their European roots or because they themselves had fought for European liberation. Americans and western Europeans shared a common enemy in the Soviet Union and the potential battlefield was Europe. Today, with the surge in Afro-American, Latin American and Asian American minorities in the USA and dying memories of the Cold War, the link with Europe is increasingly tenuous, however upsetting this may be to the Europeans. Joe Biden is the last representative of this bygone age. For his part, Barack Obama, who was raised between Hawaii and Indonesia, obviously had a more Pacific outlook and, during his tenure, the Europeans already sensed a certain degree of detachment on his part, his awareness of the growing threat from China prompting him to adopt his "Pivot to Asia" strategy.

As for Donald Trump, his crass comments are simply a reflection of modern American thinking and confirm that transatlantic relations are now more transactional than strategic. The American public can no longer understand why it should have to pay to protect the western nations (European but also Asian democracies) that are as wealthy as and have larger populations than the USA but seem unprepared to unite in defending themselves.

Even though he may have since backtracked, Donald Trump's comments about the possibility of American withdrawal from NATO, which cast doubts on transatlantic solidarity and on the relevance of Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, should not have come as a surprise in the light of the reasons given above. First and foremost, his comments were entirely consistent with the statement he made in Brussels in 2017 when he attended his first NAC meeting after his election. They also correspond to his negotiating strategy, as set out in his book "The Art of the Deal", which is purely business-oriented. Common values take second place to national economic interests, contrary to the provisions of Article 2 of the Washington Treaty. It should be mentioned in passing that the main market for American arms exports is Europe. According to the *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute* (Sipri), 55% of the arms imported by the European countries between 2019 and 2023 came from the United States. If Presidential candidate Donald Trump is now pushing the Europeans to increase their military spending (at times even resorting to moral blackmail), he is really looking to fill the American arms industry coffers. Moreover, his decision to abandon America's allies, in particular in Syria in 2018, prompted the then Defence Secretary James Mattis to resign with the tart reminder to the President that "*America First does not mean America Alone*".

When the Americans next go to the polls, they will elect the President they think will best defend their interests, not those of their allies. If Joe Biden is re-elected, it will make little difference, since Congress has

---

<sup>8</sup> Speech given by Defence Secretary, Robert Gates at the NAC in 2011, in which he slammed the "free rider" allies for not bearing their fair share of the burden within NATO by skimping on their defence budgets.

already shown that it is divided over support for Europe, as evidenced by its stonewalling over aid for Ukraine. If Donald Trump is elected, that in itself would put the Atlantic Alliance at risk, but it could also be considered an opportunity for Europeans to take charge of their own security by assuming their responsibilities to a greater degree.

## 9. European Defence or Defence of Europe?

The most obvious way of sharing the burden of responsibilities more equitably would be to strengthen the European pillar of NATO and for the Europeans to contribute more to their own defence, without losing the reassurance afforded by American leadership and the presence of its military command structures in the Alliance. Admittedly, it is natural and easier for the Allies to bow to the leadership of the most powerful partner (a partner that spends ten times more on defence and on military capabilities deployable in European theatres of operations than the biggest European contributors), especially one conveniently located at some distance on the other side of the ocean. Another principle that also applies to the members of an alliance or a coalition is that “he who pays the piper calls the tune”, in other words the concept of a framework nation only to be expected to provide more human, material and financial resources than its partners.

Even if the Americans were to withdraw from NATO, this should not signal the end of the Alliance. For the Europeans and their collective defence, NATO is a form of life insurance. They will therefore need to change their approach to an organisation that is vital to them. They should stop thinking of NATO as an American organisation to which they belong, **but as a European organisation of which the Americans happen to be members**. The Europeans should take a leaf out of the American book and think of NATO as a regional organisation, the role of which is to protect the continent of Europe and the North Atlantic, guarantee the interoperability of the allied armed forces and facilitate their coordination in action. For their part, the Americans have other organisational structures for rapid intervention and deployment of their military capabilities in Europe, in the form of US EUCOM.

It is therefore perfectly possible and legitimate to imagine a European SACEUR, along similar lines to Marshall Foch, who was the first supreme allied commander during WWI. This officer should, for preference, come from a nuclear power and be credible from a military point of view. The person selected should not be a political appointee lacking the military experience and strategic skills needed to lead the Allied armed forces to victory.

A European SACEUR could be supported by an American general for easier coordination between a coalition of NATO and American commands. This is the type of arrangement adopted in the United States for their Combined Air Operations Centers (CAOC) which are headed by generals from their closest allies, the Five Eyes<sup>9</sup>. **A European SACEUR with no other national functions would be able to concentrate exclusively on his NATO role**, in other words on defending his territory, as the SACT does today.

---

<sup>9</sup> Five Eyes (FVEY): an anglosphere intelligence alliance comprising five countries (United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and New Zealand)



For the European allies, those wishing to stake a claim on the supreme operational function in the NATO command structure in Europe should also be prepared to make financial and capability efforts on a par with their ambitions. This approach would give added credibility to the European allies and their willingness to bear a fairer share of the burden of ensuring Europe's defence together with their transatlantic allies. If the European allies were to adopt a more ambitious approach to NATO, it would have to be in compliance with the 3D principle<sup>10</sup>, tacitly agreed at the time when the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) was established in the late 90s.

For the Americans, Defence of Europe or European Defence, whether within NATO or the European Union (EU), will become a reality when the total defence budget of the European countries reaches levels consistent with their defence and security challenges. It is important to understand that whatever the organisation selected for military intervention, the individual countries only have one set of armed forces they can choose to deploy in either of these organisations. For the European countries, raising their defence budgets to adequate levels is not beyond them, if only because the EU, to quote just one example, has a larger population and is nearly as wealthy as the United States. In the end, it all boils down to choices, priorities and the determination of the politicians to make their countries independent in terms of defence. Such are the conditions in which the Europeans could demonstrate that they are ready and willing to share the burden and the responsibilities.

Ultimately, the Europeans must change their strategy, stop being naïve and believing that, in the name of vaguely common western values, the United States will always be there to defend them, provided they continue to purchase military supplies from America. The truth is that countries are more ready to help their allies if these allies are strong, powerful and in a position to return the favour.

Whether in NATO or other European institutions, the Europeans must take their responsibilities and put in place the necessary organisational arrangements for defending their interests, in association with the United States, when they share common interests, but also without the Americans when priorities differ.

While France has a key role to play in any such European moves, it will need to recognise that what it may consider normal and self-evident (strategic autonomy, defence efforts, etc.) will not necessarily be natural to its European allies and neighbours. Rather than trying to convince them to come round to its way of thinking, it should be more responsive to their concerns and reassure them that its aim is to work with them towards a credible European defence that does not exclude the Americans. France, which is one of the rare European countries with its own complete defence industrial and technological base (DITB), is often suspected of being fundamentally anti-American and its attempts to promote European strategic autonomy tend to be interpreted as defending its national industrial interests against its American rival.

---

<sup>10</sup> In reaction to the Franco-British Saint-Malo agreements in 1998 with regard to a European Security and Defence Policy, the American Secretary of State Madeleine Albright quoted the 3D principle to sum up the conditions acceptable to the United States and NATO: “**no decoupling** of the US from European security, **no duplication** of structures or initiatives that already exist within NATO, and **no discrimination** against non-EU NATO members”.

## 10. Conclusion

In conclusion, Europeans should not be afraid. Doubts about the outcome of the American presidential elections should be a chance for us better to organise the defence of our interests and take more responsibility in a more balanced transatlantic relationship. It is time to break free of an unhealthy overdependency that leaves us at the mercy of the American electors to decide on our future and our security.

We should consider NATO in the same way as the Americans, in other words as a European regional organisation that could perfectly well come under European military command, in coordination with the American military command in Europe. Greater European responsibility for defence would be fully consistent with the “3D” rule much loved by the Americans of “no decoupling, no duplication, no discrimination”.

Placing these options on the table for discussion would be a positive step towards reinforcing the synergies between NATO and the EU and would also be more conducive to credible European defence.

**Jean-Marc Vigilant, French Air Force Major General (retired)**

Former Director of the French War College

President of EuroDéfense-France

Research Associate at IRIS