

France moves towards reintegration into NATO

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On March 17, France's National Assembly voted 329-238 to state its approval for the foreign policy of President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister François Fillon, including Sarkozy's plans to fully reintegrate France into NATO's military command. This decision will reverse President Charles de Gaulle's 1966 decision to withdraw French officers from several top NATO staff bodies.

Though this reintegration has a largely symbolic character—France has always participated in NATO operations, recently dispatching thousands of troops to Afghanistan and the former Yugoslavia—there has been extensive public debate over the powerful political messages the move will send. By marking France's full acquiescence and participation in the US-dominated NATO command, it publicly ties French policy closer to Washington.

Powerful sections of the French bourgeoisie opposed the measure. US and French strategic interests have clashed in the past, notably when France opposed the US war drive against Iraq in the United Nations in 2003. While Americans remain popular in France, US government and financial policy is not: the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan are bitterly unpopular, and the US is widely seen as the epicenter of the financial criminality that triggered the current economic crisis.

Prime Minister François Fillon announced on March 5 that he would require the National Assembly's March 17 vote on Sarkozy's foreign policy to be a confidence vote. In other words, had the National Assembly voted against the foreign policy line, the government would have fallen and Sarkozy would have been forced to call new elections. Given the unpopularity of Sarkozy's right-wing government, this seems to be largely a measure to ensure that the conservative UMP (Union for a Popular Majority) majority in the National Assembly falls into line behind Sarkozy. Otherwise, it would have risked finding itself voted out of office.

Sarkozy, who has publicly supported reintegration into NATO since the beginning of his presidency, speaks for sections of the bourgeoisie who judge that the economic crisis and the deepening troubles of US militarism pose such a threat to the world order that France must maintain greater unity on policy with Washington.

Sarkozy formally announced his intention to fully rejoin NATO's command structure in a March 11 speech at the Military School in Paris. Referring to the Maginot Line, which German armies outflanked in the 1940 Nazi conquest of France, Sarkozy said: "What would an isolated, inward-looking French defence policy represent? A new Maginot Line against the challenges of the modern world. The certainty of defeat."

Stressing that Americans "twice came to save us," he denounced a policy of not making

accords with the US as “folly.” Noting that France’s current position “is not understood by our allies” in Europe, he said that within NATO, “France must co-lead and not submit to accomplished fact.” He added that statements that France’s rejoining NATO will undermine its independence “insult and shock our European partners, our allies, by implying that they are not independent.”

Sarkozy rebutted charges that, by rejoining NATO, France is taking sides in a “clash of civilisations” between the US and the Muslim world. Such concerns are particularly important because many of France’s most important former colonies (Algeria, Morocco, Syria, etc.) are in the Muslim world, and much of its immigrant population consists of super-exploited Muslim workers.

He baldly defended the role of NATO’s members in US wars of aggression in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq: “No, the Atlantic Alliance [i.e., NATO] is not pursuing a ‘clash of civilisations.’ It has flown to the defence of the Muslims of Bosnia and Kosovo against Milosevic’s aggression, and defends the Afghan people against the return of the Taliban and Al Qaeda.” Incredibly, even though the Iraq war was prosecuted primarily by leading NATO member states—the US, UK, Spain and Italy—Sarkozy maintained that “the Iraq war has nothing to do with NATO.”

Since Sarkozy’s February 7 announcement that “the moment was coming” to explain the importance of France-US links to the French people, a number of prominent politicians from the Socialist Party (PS) on the bourgeois left and inside Sarkozy’s own UMP have criticised Sarkozy’s policies. The PS demanded and obtained a parliamentary debate on the matter. Ex-PS defence ministers Paul Quilès and Jean-Pierre Chevènement both wrote editorials warning that they could trap France in conflicts motivated by US, rather than French, interests.

Former UMP Prime Minister Alain Juppé, an associate of the previous president, Jacques Chirac, wrote a February 21 editorial in *Le Monde* attacking Sarkozy’s policy. He noted the essential absence of a common European defence policy, warning: “Conceived in the context between Soviet and Western blocs, [NATO] must today redefine its reason for being, its missions, and where it should intervene. The vision the US has is not necessarily identical to that of Europeans, and especially of the French.”

Underlying the bourgeoisie’s divisions over Sarkozy’s NATO policy is the awareness that it will draw France closer to the US, even though none of the political conflicts that motivated de Gaulle’s 1966 withdrawal from NATO have been resolved. These motivations were quite complex. Though the usual explanation is that de Gaulle considered NATO’s integrated command too closely aligned with US strategic interests, his decision was also the product of the animosity between de Gaulle and Washington, bound up with concerns about internal French politics.

Lasting geopolitical interests unquestionably informed de Gaulle’s decision. Ostensibly due to fears of a possible shift in US policy towards the USSR in Europe, he wanted France to develop an independent nuclear arsenal as an anti-Soviet deterrent. A French nuclear arsenal, de Gaulle hoped, would also lend weight to arguments that Germany did not need its own nuclear arsenal and serve to tie Germany more closely to France. De Gaulle also feared the consequences of the US military interventions abroad—especially, at the time, in Vietnam, a former French colony that had won its independence in a war that ended with a

humiliating French defeat in 1954, at Dien Bien Phu.

Both personally and politically, moreover, de Gaulle never forgot Washington's determined opposition to his political career during World War II. At that time, he led the Free French and coordinated the bourgeois Resistance to Nazi rule in France, struggling to preserve as much independence as possible from his more powerful US and British allies for a French bourgeois regime and to uphold French imperialist interests in its colonies in Africa and the Near East. As such, he often found himself at cross-purposes with Washington.

From the beginning of the Nazi occupation, Washington preferred to deal with the collaborationist French authorities at Vichy. It sent Admiral David Leahy to Vichy as US ambassador to France in early 1941. De Gaulle was further infuriated by a joint US and British decision in 1942 to name Admiral Jean-François Darlan, an ex-Vichy official, head of French colonial possessions in North Africa after the US and UK invaded and defeated German armies there. After Darlan's assassination, the US forced de Gaulle to negotiate an agreement with another official with Vichy sympathies, General Henri Giraud.

The "certain idea of France" that de Gaulle promoted after liberation from the Nazis—the myth of a cultured and humanitarian country that had, up to and including its ruling classes, resisted Nazi rule—depended on an alliance with the bourgeois left and with French Stalinism. As the overwhelming majority of the French bourgeoisie collaborated with the Nazis, de Gaulle—despite his conservative political origins—found himself forced to associate with many left bourgeois politicians, including ex-Popular Front ministers Pierre Mendès-France and Pierre Cot and Resistance leader Jean Moulin.

To defeat the revolutionary challenge by the working class at the time of the Liberation, de Gaulle relied on the French Communist Party (PCF). He understood that its policy—supported by both right-wing PCF apparatchiks and the Kremlin leadership around Stalin—was directed above all against proletarian revolution and in favour of the revival of the French national state. He later wrote in his memoirs about the PCF at the time of the Liberation: "Kicking, biting, and bucking, but hitched in the yoke and submitting to the bit and the bridle, it thus also pulled the heavy cart [i.e., of French national ambitions]. My task was to hold the reins."

Using its immense prestige as the largest party in the Resistance and the political representative of the USSR, which had played the lead role in the military defeat of Nazi Germany, the PCF steered the working class behind de Gaulle and the French bourgeois state. The PCF incorporated socialist-minded Resistance fighters into the French army, disbanding workers' committees that had taken over factories as Nazi rule collapsed and collaborating in the reestablishment of factory owners' executive control. In exchange, de Gaulle and the French bourgeoisie tolerated a social situation in which the PCF played a major role in trade unions and local politics in post-war France.

Powerful tensions between the US and de Gaulle lasted into the run-up to the 1966 withdrawal from NATO. After de Gaulle returned to power in 1958, during the Algerian war for independence against France, there were persistent rumours of CIA involvement in plots against de Gaulle, notably the 1961 pro-colonial Generals' Putsch. One of the achievements of the 1966 withdrawal from NATO was to dampen the raging conflicts inside the French bourgeoisie itself; as *Le Monde* noted in a recent editorial, it created "the image, and also the reality, of a more independent policy from the US that enjoyed consensus support in Paris."

Bourgeois opposition to Sarkozy's current proposal is bound up with concerns that reversing de Gaulle's arrangements will allow divisive conflicts inside the French bourgeoisie over relations with the US to reemerge, with uncertain domestic consequences. None of the broader strategic differences between France and the US that motivated de Gaulle—the relation to Russia, building an independent pole of European power, concerns over competing military interventions in ex-colonial countries—have been resolved.

The French bourgeoisie views rather coldly US policy in the ex-Communist bloc—most recently, US encouragement last August of an attack by the Georgian regime of Mikhail Saakashvili on Russian forces in South Ossetia. Like most other European powers, France opposes US plans to admit Georgia and other ex-Soviet republics into NATO, as that would have committed it last year to war with Russia to defend Saakashvili. The establishment of an independent European military programme—quietly but powerfully opposed by Washington—has also languished. French security officials objected that France's re-entry into NATO would be seen as a French surrender on this question.

Publicly tying France to US policy will puncture the myth of the "certain idea of France" that de Gaulle and his successors used to dull class consciousness in France, portraying French imperialism as a somehow qualitatively different, more humane power. The French bourgeoisie now risks being broadly seen as a toady to Washington, notably due to broad popular opposition to French participation in the US-led occupation of Afghanistan.

In an interview with news magazine Marianne, sociologist Emmanuel Todd noted that by re-entering NATO as the US embarks on a project of conquest in the Muslim world, France is "positioning [itself] in an ideological construction against the Muslim world. This posture is also very much of a piece with Sarkozy's interior politics.... The search for scapegoats, the emergence of an Islamophobic ideology hostile to immigrant children...this is not in France's character. In the final analysis, the French always prefer decapitating noblemen to decapitating foreigners."

As Todd suggests, the airing of the domestic political conflicts bound up with de Gaulle's departure from NATO could also prove highly explosive. France is turning back towards NATO as its political elite cultivates moods traditionally associated with the extreme right, which the departure from NATO was designed to hide. Sarkozy won his election by capturing the neo-fascist National Front (FN) vote through a law-and-order campaign, whose rhetoric was echoed by his main adversary, the PS's Ségolène Royal. Sarkozy also became the first president to publicly greet the leader of the FN, Jean-Marie Le Pen, at the Elysée presidential palace.

The best development that could emerge out of this episode is the reemergence, among working people and intellectuals, of a class-conscious approach to the French state, the stakes of foreign policy, and the historical crimes of the French bourgeoisie.

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