

# Sarkozy To Formalize French Return To NATO Military Command

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Sarkozy to announce France's return to NATO military command

French President Nicolas Sarkozy is widely expected to announce later on Wednesday that France is returning to NATO's command structure 43 years after Charles de Gaulle pulled Paris out and evicted US military bases from French soil, reported dpa.

Sarkozy will probably make the announcement during an address at the conference "France, European Defence and NATO in the 21st Century," at the Ecole Miliare in Paris, in the presence of NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer.

The decision has stirred some protest, particularly from die-hard Gaullists within Sarkozy's own UMP party and from his political opposition on the left and centre.

The Socialist politician who Sarkozy beat in the 2007 presidential election, Segolene Royal, has been particularly critical of the move, describing NATO as the "armed wing of the West."

In an opinion piece in their daily Le Monde, Royal called the decision a "withdrawal" in three directions: "regarding the evolution of today's world; regarding the role of France and of Europe in international relations; regarding the guaranties for our collective security."

Another former presidential candidate, Francois Bayrou, said the move meant that France was losing its independence.

Since de Gaulle's decision to leave NATO's military command, "France has gained a freedom of speech that allowed us to say no to the war in Iraq," Bayrou said. .... For Sarkozy, the move represents a part of his long-stated aim of making France a major player in all [sic] major international institutions.

In addition, although French troops are deployed on several NATO missions, Paris has not had a full voice in forming strategy and long-range planning.

That is now expected to change. According to media reports, France has been angling to get two NATO commands, a command headquarters in Lisbon and the Allied Command Transformation in Norfolk, Virginia, which among other things provides the conceptual framework for the conduct of future Alliance operations.

A debate on the move has been scheduled in the French Parliament for March 17, and while it is expected to be spirited there is little doubt that Sarkozy has the votes to get his way.

The decision is to be formally announced at the NATO summit at the beginning of April.

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