

# REINTERPRETING GENERAL DE GAULLE: NATIONALIST OR REALIST?

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In the 1960s, the integration progress of the European Community into a more economically and politically connected coalition stagnated for a long time. The majority of current literature attributes the continuing deadlock to Charles de Gaulle's personal sentiment against the European Grand Design, but does not take France's global status into consideration. This paper argues against this view and explains de Gaulle's realist ideology underlying his international actions using the geopolitical perspective of the internal relations within the Western bloc during the Cold War Period. By intensively discussing France's complex relations with the United States, Benelux, and Germany, the current paper aims to reinterpret de Gaulle in the field of foreign policy and will attempt to explain why the realist understanding of de Gaulle was more in line with the contemporary geopolitical conditions.

In 1965, Walter Hallstein attempted to introduce the European Community's own financing plans and incorporated qualified majority voting (QMV) into the Community's decision-making process, which might have given rise to further integration of the Six (France, Western Germany, Italy, Netherland, Belgium, Netherland, Luxemburg). However, General de Gaulle instead responded by withdrawing representatives from the Council of Ministers to protest against the provocative policy of expanding the Community's supranational power, which resulted in the Empty Chair Crisis, marking the beginning of a sustained stagnation in the integration dynamic. The existing literature is divergent in understanding the reasons why de Gaulle disfavored further integration under the threat of eastern communism throughout his rule. Some attribute his efforts to his personal dislike of the supranational Union or his narrow nationalist attitude, explaining his actions through the lens of *grandeur* or Frankish national faith. On the contrary, other scholars describe de Gaulle's foreign policy in the

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framework of political realism and portray de Gaulle as only “concerned with their own security and act in pursuit of their own national interests.”<sup>1</sup> By intensively discussing France’s complex relations with the United States, Benelux, and Germany, the current paper aims to reinterpret de Gaulle in the field of foreign policy and will attempt to explain why the realist understanding of de Gaulle was more in line with the contemporary geopolitical conditions.

Existing literature is rich in analyses of de Gaulle’s foreign policy ideologies. For example, international relations scholar Thomas Risse writes that “de Gaulle re-introduced the notion of French exceptionalism and uniqueness in terms of a civilizing mission for the world (mission civilisatrice).”<sup>2</sup> Here, Risse claims that de Gaulle’s actions in the context of the Cold War was essentially due to his belief in the French mission, which was to revitalize Frankish nation and culture all the way back to Charlemagne. Risse also argues that de Gaulle wanted to *demonstrate to the world* that the Franks were able to act in independence and in eminence.<sup>3</sup> Hence, authors in this faction mainly uphold the notion of narrow nationalism, portraying France as a global player actively seeking spiritual independence and the revitalization of Frankish images. On the other hand, global affairs professor Philip G. Cerny at Princeton concludes that de Gaulle’s intent was to “escape from the Cold War ideological structure and to replace it with a structure based upon national realities.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, Martin argues that de Gaulle’s philosophy puts nations and countries above ideology and prioritizes political realities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the literature of this faction depicts de Gaulle as a traditional realist concerned with France’s own security, interest and power.<sup>6</sup> This paper advocates for Cerny and Martin’s argument and further explores why de Gaulle was a traditional realist in a geopolitical perspective and how this principle was arguably reflected in his diplomacy strategies.

De Gaulle’s geopolitical considerations were exemplified by the fact that France’s disengagement with the Community integration was mainly due to France’s conflict with the United States, who had been deeply involved in the Community since the establishment of the Marshall Plan in 1948. The dispute

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1. Włodzimierz Julian Korab-Karpowicz, “Political Realism in International Relations,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/realism-intl-relations/>>.

2. Thomas Risse, Nationalism and Collective Identities: Europe versus the Nation-State?, *Developments in west European politics*, 2 (2002), 89.

3. Garret Martin, “Playing the China Card? Revisiting France’s Recognition of Communist China, 1963–1964,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008): 52.

4. Philip G. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur: Ideological Aspects of De Gaulle’s Foreign Policy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 150.

5. Martin, 80.

6. Andrew Moravcsik, “Charles de Gaulle and Europe: the new revisionism,” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 1 (2012): 54.

began in 1956 when the Suez Canal Crisis started brewing, and the United States repudiated France's and Britain's initiative against Gamal Abdul Nasser, the Egyptian president under the Soviets' support. Americans' timid response toward the Soviet threats and the subsequent withdrawal request regardless of France's share in the Suez Canal Company demonstrated that Washington prioritized easing small disputes over the vital interests of its smaller allies such as France. In addition, Frédéric Bozo argues that the establishment of nuclear arsenals and even Sputnik heightened the potential cost of confronting Moscow and strengthened this belief.<sup>7</sup> Even though Washington, as claimed, reserved the ability to protect allies through nuclear means, Anglo-Americans only agreed to hand over the nuclear control in the case of emergency as opposed to directly putting it under the command of Quai d' Orsay (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs) for the sake of forestalling "the risks of proliferation" in the continuing negotiation from 1959 to 1962.<sup>8</sup> In general, the ambivalent attitudes of Americans towards the Soviets' nuclear deployment "diminished the plausibility" of a large-scale reaction by Washington if Moscow launched an attack on Western Europe.<sup>9</sup> This speculation was not without evidence and was supported by the fact that the potential nuclear war was becoming more and more destructive to France, but not to the United States.<sup>10</sup> Hence, de Gaulle felt that "the defense of Europe was a burden" for the United States, a burden she would not like to bear.<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, de Gaulle had been loudly dissociating himself from the supranational Community and thereby demonstrating French's independence in the realm of foreign policy without consulting the United States.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, de Gaulle claimed in May 1962, the French goal was to "defend itself," and "an integrated Europe would . . . remain tagging behind America."<sup>13</sup> So, by stepping out of further integration, France could counterbalance the Soviet clout and thus minimize potential losses through its own means by diverting more maneuverability towards taking the lead among or seeking a mutual understanding with non-Westerners, or at least lowering the possibility of minor aggression from the Eastern hegemon without looking upon the "hypocritical" guarantee of the United States.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, de Gaulle's strategies toward America and France's own defense could essentially be understood as negative nationalism, a realistic

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7. Frédéric Bozo, *Two Strategies for Europe: De Gaulle, the United States, and the Atlantic Alliance* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 4.

8. *Ibid.*, 62

9. *Ibid.*, 4.

10. Cerny, 192.

11. Marc Trachtenberg, "The de Gaulle Problem." *Journal of Cold War Studies* 14, no. 1 (2012): 85.

12. W.W. Kulski, *De Gaulle and the world: the foreign policy of the fifth French Republic* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1966), 34.

13. Bozo, 80.

14. *Ibid.*, 168.

reaction to American indifferences and lack of full guarantee, rather than a positive nationalism or grandeur, that puts national ideals over other geopolitical calculations.

As mentioned earlier, political realism was shown in France's interaction with the Community, while this type of strategy was particularly evident in the relation with Benelux. France's tie with Benelux countries was defined as interdependence, ambiguity, and animosity, which was especially clear in the negotiation of the Fouchet Plan from 1961 to 1962: de Gaulle aimed to empower Europe with independence in foreign affairs with a view of putting "an end to American integration,"<sup>15</sup> while the prospect of the intergovernmental design led Benelux to see the Fouchet Plan as potential economic disintegration, as well as a Frankish tool to challenge Anglo-American leadership in NATO.<sup>16</sup> Dutch Foreign Minister Joseph Luns notably voiced strong opposition and stressed British accession as the prerequisite for agreeing upon the terms in order to dilute Franko-German dominance.<sup>17</sup> Overall, as de Gaulle was calling for a united and autonomous Western Europe, Benelux leaders' "insincerity" in the disapproval of the failed design frustrated de Gaulle and made the conflicting interest clearer than ever.<sup>18</sup> As especially manifested in the Fouchet Plan, this type of geopolitical interest misalignment between Benelux and France convinced de Gaulle to cease further cooperation with the Community from 1963 to 1969, which explained the long-term stalemate at almost all segments of the Community and de Gaulle's refusal after the Fouchet failure to join the formal meetings as institutionalized by pre-approved treaties, such as Meetings of EC heads of government and the Community's quarterly meetings of foreign ministers.<sup>19</sup> In sum, for France itself, extricating from Washington's grip denoted greater freedom in foreign policy to make up for Americans' insufficient guarantee of protection and retaliation in case of nuclear attack. However, for Benelux, the Fouchet plan merely meant to turn their master towards France, a less reliable ally, while potentially upsetting the United States and lessening the chance of a massive American response to the communists' aggression. As a representative of political integration attempt, the Fouchet Plan negotiation uncovered the inherent geopolitical conflict between Benelux and France, a reality that appeared to be true throughout de Gaulle's rule, caused his skepticism of the whole integration, and led to France's alienation from European Design throughout the decade.

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15. Jeffrey Vanke, "An Impossible Union: Dutch Objections to the Fouchet Plan, 1959–62," *Cold War History* 2, no. 1 (2001): 97.

16. *Ibid.*, 97–99, 108.

17. *Ibid.*, 104.

18. Cerny, 210.

19. Anthony Teasdale, "The Fouchet Plan: De Gaulle's Intergovernmental Design for Europe," *LEQS Paper* 117 (2016), 52–53.

For de Gaulle, neither did West Germany seem to be a reliable ally, which speaks to de Gaulle's strong objection against Community supranational expansion in a traditional realistic sense. The European Community essentially revolved around the France-Germany axis, so the German-American relations defined the Six (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxemburg, Netherland, West Germany) as either the satellites of the United States or as independent entities between the superpowers. Just as Charles de Gaulle vetoed the UK accession in 1963 and 1967, the close US-Germany tie might have arisen the same concern of "Anglo-American Trojan horse," making his aspiration of Europe being an independent third power an unfulfilled illusion. A geopolitical reality substantiated the failure of de Gaulle's aspiration: Germany's defeat, west-east division, as well as its long shared border with the Soviets limited her decision and conditioned her survival and prosperity primarily on alliance with the United States.<sup>20</sup> Only through the framework of NATO could Bonn (capital of West Germany) maintain her global engagement after the historic defeat,<sup>21</sup> and her fear of the potential encroachment of the Soviets combined with French incompetence made the Atlantic Alliance with Washington the only "true guarantee of their [Germans] security."<sup>22</sup> In other words, "Germany could not afford monogamous marriage with France."<sup>23</sup> For these reasons, De Gaulle believed Bonn's close contact with Washington and distrust of the French ability to protect West Germany nearly *offset* the French-German pact (which started with the European Coal and Steel Community from the Schuman Plan when France intended to limit German power while neutralizing the American-German intimacy at the same time) and pulled the European Design away from the claimed third power between the superpowers to the Atlantic Alliance under Anglo-American leadership. Therefore, the internal division between the two founders of the Community made it clear that the full commitment to the Six was an unfavorable choice for the French in a realistic sense. Deep involvement in the French-German agreement meant binding her decisions and placing France under the discretion of the United States. On the contrary, looking outward grants a significant degree of freedom to take the initiative to reduce the external threat on her own instead of counting on the unreliable neighbor.

Some pre-existing literature refers to de Gaulle's strategies as the policy of grandeur, which means to pretentiously demonstrate foreign policy independence, showcase Frankish power, and restore France's national pride dating back to its colonial past. Just as Cerny argues, the purpose of establishing a conspicuous presence in places other than the European continent was to show France's

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20. Cerny, 163.

21. Bozo, 51.

22. W.W. Kulski, "De Gaulle in International Affairs," *The High School Journal*, 49(3), 141.

23. *Ibid.*

ambition to play a vital role in the world, if not as prominent as the United States and the Soviets Union.<sup>24</sup> However, the reality was far from the spirits manifested in de Gaulle's memoir *France cannot be France without greatness*<sup>25</sup> due to Quai d'Orsay's grave and embarrassing situation in the face of the increasingly aggressive Soviets, intensifying global dichotomy, and the impending nuclear attack.

As discussed earlier, the United States' uncertain stance on nuclear retaliation, Benelux's fear of France's dominance, and Germany's thirst for re-engagement with the world forced de Gaulle out of his plan and instead sought strategic independence. Similarly, the nationalistic rhetoric does not take one issue into account, which is that de Gaulle handed off the agricultural aspect of state sovereignty in exchange for the alluring benefit of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The enormous CAP agricultural subsidies, which entered into force by the 1957 Treaty of Rome, lured Quai d'Orsay to make a concession and consider supranational possibilities in this sector, which it would otherwise disfavor.<sup>26</sup> Likewise, we might not assume that de Gaulle would firmly cling to his nationalistic stance had the geopolitical realities discouraged him from doing so. It is rather to believe that de Gaulle could and was willing to reverse his "nationalistic disguise" when giving into French national sovereignty brought colossal benefits or helped avoid risks.

The term "nationalist" implies that de Gaulle, or France, still retained a variety of choices at his considerations while determining to oust Walter Hallstein in 1965 in the Luxembourg Compromise in order to safeguard national sovereignty and so-called *grandeur*. However, under the direct threat of the Soviets and nuclear risk, it was unlikely that France still had a backup option in foreign policy that did not put Frankish fundamental interest in danger during the 1960s. This limitation and her lonely presence in Europe mandated Quai d'Orsay to seek support elsewhere other than the European Community and Washington, pushing de Gaulle toward the recognition of China in January 1964, Latin America in September 1964, and reconciliation with Eastern Europe countries to "avoid competition in these parts of the world."<sup>27</sup>

Overall, it was not *grandeur* or national pride but the realistic necessities that guided de Gaulle's international activities. As China's eyes turned inward in 1966 due to the Cultural Revolution, Latin American countries dragged to the American side from the 1960s to 1970s, and the relation with Moscow improved

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24. Cerny, 203.

25. Adrian Waters, Charles De Gaulle and his "Europe of Nations" – Theory and Practice. Institute for a Greater Europe. <https://institutegreatereurope.com/2019/06/25/charles-de-gaulle-and-his-europe-of-nations-theory-and-practice/>.

26. John T. S. Keeler, De Gaulle and Europe's Common Agricultural Policy: The Logic and Legacies of Nationalistic Integration. *French Politics and Society* (1990), 62–77.

27. Kulski, *De Gaulle and the world*, 168.

over time,<sup>28</sup> Charles de Gaulle's international layout "splintered along social, economic, and political fault lines."<sup>29</sup> It was only when these previous geopolitical assumptions were no longer valid that de Gaulle started to reconsider his last resort, namely, Western Europe, in responding to the new international realities. Just as de Gaulle Atlantic policy softened somewhat after May 1968,<sup>30</sup> we might have seen his policy progress on this trend and strengthening the supranational European Grand Design in the same way as his successor Georges Pompidou (who endorsed the EC's own financing and improved its supranational function) in the 1970s even if de Gaulle extended his term to the next decade.

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28. *Ibid.*, 297.

29. Bozo, xi.

30. *Ibid.*