France’s return to NATO: what should be Europe’s strategy?

Grégoire Mallard and Frédéric Mérand*

The Strasbourg-Kehl Summit of 3–4 April showcased NATO’s sixtieth anniversary. Beyond the Afghanistan question and the nomination of a new secretary general (Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen), the meeting celebrated the return of France to the Alliance’s integrated military command. This decision by French president Nicolas Sarkozy erased that made by his predecessor, General Charles de Gaulle, who had abruptly withdrawn France from the integrated NATO command structure in 1966. This highly symbolic gesture from Sarkozy has been stirring passionate debate in France for almost a year, where it is presented either as a renunciation of French identity, or as an important step towards a new transatlantic agreement.

In Strasbourg, Sarkozy reminded the Allies that France has not given up on the goal of a European defence regime. In his speech on 11 March 2009, Sarkozy outlined some possible scenarios, specifically that in the short term the European Union (EU) could set up a European operational force of 60,000 men who could be deployed outside the EU borders; that it would strengthen partnerships between parts of the European defence industry; and that it will lead to an increase in the defence-related investment of member states. In fact, the French president was happy to repeat the objectives previously outlined in the Lisbon Treaty’s chapter on European security and defence policy (ESDP), but NATO itself did not put forward specific proposals for Europeanization. NATO’s own “strategic concept” which maps out the alliance’s direction is no more precise on this point.

Why was this proposal not launched initially in conjunction with EU partners? Why was the discussion not initiated within NATO’s European caucus? Because if discussions over strategy continue to be conducted without first carrying out at least some preliminary coordination among the Europeans, the countries in the EU will have the greatest difficulty in agreeing upon a common viewpoint. There will be no European solution to apply to the strategic challenges of today and tomorrow. The main obstacle which the Alliance faces, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, is the divisions among the Europeans who make up 26 out of the 28 members of NATO.

* The views expressed are attributable only to the authors in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which they are associated. Grégoire Mallard is an assistant professor in sociology at Northwestern University; Frédéric Mérand is an assistant professor of political science at the University of Montréal. They are both specialists on questions of European Security. This text is a lengthened version of an article which appeared in Le Devoir, 4 April 2009.
Europeans for the most part do not feel that the Alliance belongs to them. Because they are not able to propose common and coherent initiatives, on the whole the Europeans tend to hold rather disparate views when the time comes to contribute to European and Global security. Under these conditions Europe is not able to act as a strong partner for the United States.

This touches upon a very old debate, that of the Europeanization of NATO: this ambition, frequently wished for, but never realised, would provide for a single European voice in the Alliance. In the context of the United Nations General Assembly, within specialised agencies and in the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the EU applies a common foreign policy which is conveyed through the coordinated and permanent institutions of the European states. It is astonishing that NATO remains one of the only international organizations within which the EU cannot speak with a single voice. Admittedly there are reasons for this, notably the fact that four EU member states are not in fact members of NATO. The result of this is a weaker Europe but also a weightier Alliance. With this reintegration of France and more than likely in the short term of Sweden and Finland – only Cyprus, Malta, Ireland and Austria would remain outside of NATO. If the latter agreed to hold an observer role in a European caucus, this would no longer be a serious obstacle to formalising links between the EU and NATO.

Such a European caucus in NATO would need to tackle all subjects, there should be no taboos. The most pressing issue today is perhaps not just the deployment of forces in Afghanistan but also nuclear strategy. Alas, the French president on 11 March reasserted that in spite of France’s integration into NATO’s military command structure, “Naturally we will maintain our independent nuclear deterrent,” and France true to its word will not return to NATO’s Nuclear Planning Group. By making the nuclear file taboo, Sarkozy is limiting the degree to which NATO can be Europeanised. However this file does not just deal with the rules governing the use of nuclear weapons by NATO members – who continue to have a large number of nuclear weapons on the European continent – but also addresses nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation.

Some argue that questions of nuclear deterrence belong to another era. But can states really avoid reflecting on the risks and benefits to European safety resulting from NATO possessing nuclear weapons? General de Gaulle’s decision to withdraw French forces from the integrated command in 1966 was justified by the argument that France and Europe could be drawn into a nuclear conflict against their wishes. However, today NATO forces regularly launch conventional attacks upon the territory of the eighth nuclear power in the world: Pakistan. The new strategy which is being pursued by the Obama administration, consists of focusing on the elimination of Al Qaïda strongholds in Pakistan while at the same time negotiating an acceptable peace with Afghanistan. While not without risk of causing further escalation, this is without doubt the only possible hope of getting out of the conflict.

In so far as certain parts of the Pakistani state apparatus are suspected of colluding with terrorist organizations the American strategy is not so surprising, to revel in simulations where the most catastrophic scenarios you can imagine are played out. A scenario which is habitually played out is the following: forced back behind their lines, rebels who are being assisted by Pakistani agents seize Pakistani bases where stocks of nuclear arms are stored, India then decides to move its troops into Pakistan to eliminate the rebel-held bases, in response China mobilizes its forces in preparation for an attack on Taiwan; Japan then decides to withdraw from the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty, in accordance with article 10. The United States would be unable to remain indifferent to such an escalating situation. So what would be the response of the European members of NATO? Let us point out straight away that this type of scenario is fortunately extremely unlikely. It is not a question of creating panic amongst the population but rather to conceptualize the safety measures which NATO could employ today in order to avoid these thus far unforeseen problems erupting dramatically in the future.
However, insofar as European forces are engaged in distant conflicts, particularly in Asia the actual European perspective and more broadly NATO-view on the political and territorial questions at the heart of the conflicts becomes more fuzzy. In order to avoid the risk of escalation of conflict inherent in allied forces participation in wars in Asia, the EU member states must insist on NATO adopting the doctrine of “no-first-use” of nuclear weapons.

Some vague doubts remain regarding its nuclear strategy, the way NATO continues to function no longer corresponds to the strategic reality in which NATO forces are operating when they are deployed outside of Europe, particularly when they are engaged with states which have nuclear weapons. At a minimum, NATO should adopt the no-first-use of nuclear weapons doctrine for its operations outside European soil, this would be a significant gesture which could be seized upon as evidence that the new administration of Barak Obama has turned the page following the end of the Bush era. (One will recall that then Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld had toyed with the notion of first use of tactical nuclear weapons.)

Keeping the peace in Afghanistan is one question, nuclear strategy is another, coupled with nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. In order to move towards the establishment of a “nuclear-free zone” in the Middle East, one of the goals of the Alliance, the NATO countries should set an example, through the withdrawal of nuclear arms which they have positioned at their frontier with the Middle East, namely Turkey. The EU member states should, while the negotiations for Turkish accession to the EU are underway, discuss the military guarantees required in order for Turkey to accept the withdrawal of these weapons. Coordination with the other NATO nuclear powers in the EU (Belgium, Netherlands, Italy) would also assist the efforts of Barak Obama and Gordon Brown to accelerate NATO nuclear disarmament. Finally regarding NATO’s confidence building and safety measures, EU member states, and thus all of the signatories to the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM) treaty could promote these types of regional legal instruments and persuade the countries in the southern Mediterranean to afford better protection to fissile materials which will be circulating in larger and larger quantities in the region.

By positioning itself clearly against the first use of nuclear weapons and working towards the reduction of stockpiles of nuclear weapons which are under its control, NATO would give itself more credibility when persuading states which have nuclear weapons to opt for disarmament in keeping with Article 6 of the nuclear non-proliferation treaty. This overall nuclear strategy will help member states in their goal of nuclear non-proliferation in the Middle East. These measures will reinforce their moral and legal position vis-a-vis Afghanistan’s neighbours, Iran and Pakistan. We can guarantee that they will reduce the risks which push the threats of today onto the world of tomorrow.