Converging strategic goals prompted France in 2009 to end 43 years of self-imposed exile from NATO’s military command structure, restoring political influence in the Alliance France believed it had lost. Only two years after that decision, France took a lead role in NATO’s Libya air campaign, expanding on its significant contributions to NATO operations in Afghanistan.

“We send our soldiers on the terrain but we don’t participate in the committee where their objectives are decided,” French President Nicolas Sarkozy said in 2009, explaining the state of France’s relationship to NATO. “Our strategy cannot remain stuck in the past when the conditions of our security have changed radically,” he said. The time had come, he asserted, “to end this situation,” declaring France’s full reintegration a month before NATO’s 60th anniversary.

France in the Fold

Paris’ return to NATO’s unified command structure paid dividends for the Alliance in Afghanistan and Libya.

By Aaron Church, Associate Editor
France was instrumental in getting NATO forces involved in the Libyan conflict. For France, the last straw came with the US abandonment of the nuclear doctrine of mutually assured destruction in favor of staged, conventional escalation. An American “graduated response” would mean fighting the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact troops conventionally on European soil, resorting to nuclear weapons in Europe if the Soviets couldn’t be stopped any other way. De Gaulle strenuously objected to this approach, preferring to threaten immediate nuclear response to invasion rather than risk a ground war at France’s doorstep.

In 1966, de Gaulle shocked US and allied leaders by severing French forces from multinational command and walking out of allied defense and nuclear planning. France remained in the Alliance but on her own political terms.

With France now absent from NATO military command functions, de Gaulle demanded the immediate departure of allied forces from French soil. NATO’s military headquarters outside Paris relocated to Mons, Belgium—where it remains today. The US was also forced to vacate nuclear forces from air bases throughout France.

The French ambassador to the US at the time, Charles Lucet, framed the French stance: “We want to remain your friend and your ally within the Atlantic Alliance.” Though de Gaulle resisted being pulled into a conflict between titans against France’s will, Lucet acknowledged that NATO remained “indispensable for the balance and for the peace of the world.” Lucet expressed France’s contention, however, that the Soviet military threat to Europe was greatly diminished. “If the threat were
to be revived,” he said, “you know which
side we would be on.”

Two months before allied operations
drew to a close in Libya, Sarkozy stated
unequivocally that France’s lead role there
vindicated his decision to rejoin NATO’s
unified command.

At the political level, France pushed
NATO to take a much deeper look at
Libyan involvement than it otherwise
may have done. While US assets were
key to the speed of success, the strategic
objectives in Libya were much more in
line with France’s goals.

“What’s happening in northern Africa
is very closely tied to French national
interests and probably a bit further away
from American national interests,” said
French Air Force Col. Eric Mongnot, head
of France’s delegation to NATO Allied
Command Transformation, in Norfolk, Va.

“We knew that this had an impact on
European soil, security, and stability. ... We had a political goal, we had the mili-
tary means to do it, and we launched the
operation,” he said.

“We were politically more influential;
... that’s the main thing that we’ve gained
going back into the structure,” he added.

For France and the US, the defining
purpose of the Alliance remains collective
defense from external attack. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty guarantees
that any armed attack against a member
is considered an attack on the Alliance
as a whole.

“If an Article 5 [event] were to emerge,
then there’s no question—all our forces
would be engaged into that if needed,” said Mongnot.

Following the terrorist attacks of Sept.
11, 2001, NATO invoked Article 5 for the
first time in history. “In a spirit of solidarity
and responsibility,” then-President of
France Jacques Chirac threw his country’s
full support behind the US-led invasion
of Afghanistan.

Three months later, 5,000 French troops
deployed to Southwest Asia, second only
to Britain among allied contributors. Early
on, naval aircraft from the carrier Charles
de Gaulle were flying 10 percent of allied
air cover and reconnaissance.

“For Afghanistan, we were one of
the first countries to provide fighters,”
noted French Lt. Col. Jean-Patrick Borja,
former airlift pilot and current exercise
assessment chief at NATO-Allied Com-
mand Transformation. French personnel
helped open the Manas Transit Center
in Kyrgyzstan in December 2001. “We
were there with the Americans,” sup-
plying fighters, KC-135 tankers, and
airlift support less than six months after
the attacks, Borja said. “I think this is
quite significant because after that, ... everybody followed up, but France was
the first.”

Even before rejoining NATO’s planning
and chain of command, “we still showed
that we were a very reliable ally to the
US,” Borja said.

During Operation Anaconda in March
2002, French fighter aircraft, flying
from the carrier de Gaulle and land
based at Manas, carried out the first
non-US air strikes against targets in
Afghanistan.

Early quibbles over the proximity of
air strikes to civilian zones aside, France,
unlike many allies, placed no restrictive
caveats on its military contribution.

“We just had the NATO rules, and
that’s it—the same as the Americans,”
said French Lt. Col. Vincent Fournier,
a former Mirage pilot, now a capability
and requirements officer at NATO ACT.

Initially outside NATO planning,
French forces wrestled with equipment
incompatibility—notably targeting
pods—which hindered coordination
with allied combat controllers. With
some improvisation, “we did overcome
that ... and it worked in the end,” said
Fournier.

Bitter political disagreement over the
invasion of Iraq in 2003 poisoned public
discourse between France and the US, but
had little effect on French commitment in
Afghanistan. “Like the US, the spirit is,
‘If we go to war, then we go to war,’” said
Borja. “I don’t think you’ll find that spirit
in many countries, ... even in Europe.”

Reconverging Interests

France’s relationship with allies
throughout the Cold War and beyond has
been defined by Paris’ staunch assertion
of national sovereignty and independence.
This has earned France a reputation as
difficult to work with.

Primarily, though, the decision to rejoin
NATO command acknowledged converg-
ing interests with the organization in the
wake of the Cold War. NATO operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan highlighted the strategic merge.

“The first thing that we very often hear is that France has rejoined NATO, and that’s a mistake, ... but very often we hear that even among our NATO allies,” Mongnot said. “We never left the NATO exercises, we have never left NATO operations—we have always been among the first contributors, always in the first five.”

Reintegration was largely driven by the same reason France originally split with NATO’s command: desire for equal voice in strategy.

“As far as we’re concerned, ... we keep our sovereignty. The French military assets are still under national command and that hasn’t changed,” explained Mongnot. “The main thing is that we didn’t want to have military orders imposed when “we hadn’t taken part in the deliberation. Now we are fully back in.”

The move was also an unequivocal message of commitment to NATO as the foundational defense structure in Europe. The French leadership was eager to vindicate the nation’s allegiance to the Alliance after long being criticized as promoting humanitarian and security operations led by the European Union separate from and at the expense of NATO defense posture.

“We clearly know that for the defense of Europe, the first toolbox is NATO. We’re not expecting the European Union to [defend] against a high-intensity attack,” stressed Mongnot. “Being back in NATO demonstrates that we are fully committed to making NATO an operational and efficient military tool,” he added.

France is NATO’s fourth largest financial contributor and one of only four European members to spend the baseline two percent of GDP on defense. Like the US, France feels the burden of meeting its military obligations.

“France, just like any other nation, is facing a financial crisis,” explained Mongnot. Sharing the burden along with the US is good; “however, we are only one nation,” he added, echoing the words of former Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates. Gates, in a parting shot delivered at his last NATO meeting, warned that if the defense spending of most European allies continues to free-fall, “future US political leaders ... may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost.”

While neither France nor the US can compel allies that are unwilling or unable to contribute, “as far as France is concerned, NATO should be and should remain ... the most efficient and capable military organization in the world,” stated Mongnot.

He explained that some within the Alliance are pushing NATO to adopt a so-called “comprehensive approach” encompassing humanitarian and reconstruction-type missions. “If it’s done at the expense of military equipment, military training, or military capability,” this approach “reduces the credibility and conventional deterrence of NATO,” stressed Mongnot. “It is good to have a high level of ambition, high expectations, but sometimes you have to be realistic.”

While NATO remains an “important pillar” of the US-French strategic relationship, he noted that “it is not the only one.” The US and French militaries “have a bilateral relationship that is a lot stronger than the one we have through NATO,” said Mongnot. NATO is an essential fixture of trans-Atlantic security, but “it’s just one of the different ways we have to talk to each other.”