

Garret Joseph Martin

General de Gaulle's Cold War

Challenging American Hegemony
1963–1968



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The study of the French past has always functioned as a kind of template for the great historical movements in European history, whether the Renaissance, Absolutism, Enlightenment, Nationalism, Democracy, or Imperialism, while the Great French Revolution still stands as a model for revolution worldwide and evokes debate over the central questions of historiography. And France and French society continue to serve as a laboratory for academic innovation in the study of history and other disciplines. Centralization provides easy access to well-preserved and rich documentary collections in Paris and provinces and departments for all periods; it is no accident that studies of local and social history were pioneered by French historians in the writings of the Annales school. France, the former French Empire, and contemporary Francophonie continue to provide models for modern studies in Imperialism, Postcolonialism, and Multiculturalism.

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Challenging American Hegemony, 1963–1968



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ABBREVIATIONS



ANF	Archives Nationales Françaises
ASP	American Selling Price
CAP	Common Agricultural Policy
CDU	Christian Democratic Union
COMECON	Council for Mutual Economic Assistance
CRU	Collective Reserve Unit
DDF	Documents Diplomatiques Français
DF	Documentation Française
DPC	Defence Planning Committee
EEC	European Economic Community
FFA	Forces Françaises d'Allemagne
FNSP	Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques
FO	Foreign Office
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States series
G10	Group of Ten
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GNI	Gross National Income
HAWK	NATO's body in charge of production and logistic organization
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
ICC	International Control Commission
IMF	International Monetary Fund

LBJL	Lyndon Baines Johnson Library
MAEF	Ministère des Affaires Etrangères Français
MLF	Multilateral Force
NAC	North Atlantic Council
NADGE	NATO Air Defense Ground Environment
NAMSO	NATO's Maintenance and Supply Organization
NARA	National Archives Record Administration
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDAC	Nuclear Defense Affairs Committee
NLF	National Liberation Front
NPG	Nuclear Planning Group
NPT	Non-Proliferation Treaty
OAS	Organisation de l'Armée Secrète
OAU	Organization of African Unity
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
PRC	People's Republic of China
PTBT	Partial Test Ban Treaty
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SDR	Special Drawing Rights
SEATO	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
SECAM	Séquentiel Couleur Avec Mémoire
TEA	Trade Expansion Act
U.K.	United Kingdom
UK-NA	United Kingdom National Archives
UN	United Nations
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UNR	Union pour la Nouvelle République
U.S.	United States
WEU	Western European Union

INTRODUCTION



[General Charles] de Gaulle is a European and the head of a metropolitan country. In addition, he has the advantage of being able to act irresponsibly. The United States, on other hand, is a world power while France is not.

—George Ball, Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting number 39, 31 January 1963

Only General de Gaulle, Mikhail Gorbachev, and Pope John Paul II made constructive proposals to address the problem of East-West relations in Europe with regard to peace, equilibrium, and Europe's destiny.

—Alain Larcan, *L'Europe de l'Atlantique à l'Oural*

On 11 March 2009, during a speech at l'Ecole Militaire, French President Nicolas Sarkozy announced that his country would fully reintegrate into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), forty-three years after General Charles de Gaulle had withdrawn France from NATO's integrated military structure.¹ Despite the objections from officials within Sarkozy's party, who decried the betrayal of the Gaullist legacy, and the criticisms from the main opposition parties, Sarkozy's decision hardly amounted to a major turning point for French policy.

Since the end of the Cold War, military ties between NATO and France had continuously strengthened. Sarkozy's decision to fully reintegrate France into NATO was less of a dramatic break with the past, and more of a culmination of a progressive rapprochement that had gained momentum in the last two decades. In other words, the contrast between 2009 and 1966 could not have been greater. While the 2009 return of the "prodigal son" to the NATO family proved low-key and consensual, de Gaulle's 1966 decision to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military structure had marked a traumatic moment for the Alliance.

The departure from NATO would come to symbolize French President General Charles de Gaulle's turbulent relationship with his Western allies throughout the 1960s. During this period, the General came to be re-

garded as the scourge of Atlantic unity and the biggest threat to American leadership of the Western Alliance in an era still dominated by the Cold War.² When the former leader of the Free French and postwar head of state returned to power in June 1958 to tackle the Algerian War, France's Western allies hoped that he would end the conflict and restore stability and prosperity to his country. They could not anticipate that de Gaulle would not only fulfill those aims, but also pursue an ambitious foreign policy agenda in the following eleven years that would seriously challenge the structure of the Atlantic Community.

The General's bold diplomacy generally received the support of French public opinion, but caused grave chagrin to Paris's Western partners.³ The latter often cursed the French president, whose masterful sense of timing and cultivated air of secrecy turned him into a formidable opponent. Even his bitter critic, the Belgian politician Paul-Henri Spaak, reluctantly acknowledged that:

He [de Gaulle] is, however, in daily politics a tactician with an exceptional and undeniable talent. He is a great diplomat, but more by the variety of the means that he used than by the grandeur of the aim he had. He hides his intentions, suddenly reveals them, generally with panache. He creates uncertainty in the mind of those he negotiates with ... There is no one better when it comes to giving importance to what he does, and to hide, behind his assurance, the fluctuations of his thought.⁴

De Gaulle's attachment to secrecy followed from his personality traits of autonomy and aloofness, with even his closest advisers declaring that it was impossible to achieve familiarity with him.⁵ It also stemmed from the General's conception of authority and leadership. The leader needed to be distant, since he believed authority depended on status, and status required distance. Without mystery there could be no prestige, since one could not revere what one knew too well.⁶

Throughout his career, de Gaulle never hesitated to resort to deliberate ambiguity, as vagueness and a certain blurring of categories generally suited his purposes; he frequently conflated tactics and aims.⁷ What he meant by expressions such as a "European Europe," a "Europe from the Atlantic to the Urals," or the neutralization of Vietnam, was never clearly spelled out. He kept his allies second guessing about his ultimate intentions, much to their frustration. That goes a long way toward explaining why the General has remained to this day a captivating yet controversial figure of postwar European history.

The vast number of memoirs, biographies, and scholarly works focusing on de Gaulle—which exceeds three thousand—is a testimony to this enduring fascination, but also reveals very sharp divisions when it comes

to assessing the overarching objective of his foreign policy. Three key fault lines stand out in the literature. The first group of historians have echoed frustrated Kennedy and Johnson administration officials in their denunciations of de Gaulle as irrational, and complained that his policy was “largely animated by anti-US prejudice.” United States (U.S.) officials often viewed de Gaulle as the ultimate free rider, a “highly egocentric” leader, “with touches of megalomania,” who welcomed confrontation with the U.S. as a way to regain France’s identity as a Great Power; as U.S. President Kennedy claimed, “these bastards [the French] just live off the fat of the land and spit on us every chance they get.”⁸

Other scholars agree that the French president could be considered anti-American in the sense that he challenged U.S. leadership and harbored strong antipathy for U.S. society.⁹ Various authors and former French officials, however, reject the idea that de Gaulle was somehow obsessed with Washington. In their view, France and the U.S. strongly disagreed during the 1960s, but there was nothing that could be construed as systematic hostility on the French side. The tension resulted instead from conflicting national goals, and if anything, the General was driven more by anti-hegemonic than anti-American feelings.¹⁰

Additionally, authors and former officials disagree on whether or not de Gaulle possessed some kind of grand design. If Spaak took the most categorical approach when he claimed that “I see in his [de Gaulle’s] action neither doctrine nor grand design that he pursued with continuity,” others have also tried to downplay the idea that the French president followed a broader vision for his diplomacy.¹¹ They have pointed out that behind the blustering and ambitious rhetoric, the General sought to achieve more modest aims, such as restoring his country’s pride and independence or guaranteeing commercial benefits for France when it came to European integration.¹²

Other officials and scholars acknowledge that de Gaulle had a design, but define it as essentially negative, narrow, and selfish. For instance, they argue that the General’s diplomatic agenda aimed to establish a continental system led by France and that he deployed his strength only to advance some largely irrelevant claims to greatness.¹³ Alternatively, a final group of scholars recognizes the French president’s foreign policy as an ambitious and genuine attempt to overcome the bipolar Cold War order. They point out that de Gaulle viewed the Cold War order as a dangerous system where all states were permanently threatened by two contradictory, but equally dangerous, prospects: either superpower conflict or a superpower joint hegemony. Driven by “global revisionism,” he sought to fashion a more stable and balanced multipolar world order, based on the multiplicity of nation-states and responsive to their individual needs.¹⁴

Furthermore, even those who accept that de Gaulle sincerely wanted to overcome the prevailing bipolar Cold War system struggle with the feasibility of such an objective. Observers sympathetic to the ideas of the General, such as German politician Franz Josef Strauß, could not understand why his grand design downplayed the existing power relationships.¹⁵ As in Aesop's fable "The Frog and the Ox," many believed that vanity and envy blinded the French president to the moral that not all countries can become as great as they think they can.

In the eyes of his detractors, the General was living in a state of denial, as an odd and antiquated figure who refused to accept the extent to which the Cold War had transformed the international system. As Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson confided to U.S. Under Secretary of State George Ball, "he was impressed as the president [Lyndon Johnson] had been with de Gaulle's eighteenth and nineteenth century confidence and rigidity. He said, of course, de Gaulle was one hundred and fifty years behind the times, but he was not bothered by any problems about keeping up with the times."¹⁶

This book contributes to our understanding of de Gaulle and of the international history of the 1960s, by tackling the three main fault lines in the literature described above. It provides a more balanced account of the General, going beyond the misleading views of him as either a visionary or an irresponsible and anti-American nationalist. Although the French president was not systematically driven by anti-American hostility, the aim of countering U.S. power still became increasingly pervasive and central to his policies as relations between the two countries deteriorated during the 1960s.

Moreover, the book argues that de Gaulle did pursue a somewhat coherent and ambitious grand design, centered on the two key and interrelated aims of recapturing France's Great Power status and overcoming the bipolar Cold War order. Rather than simply reforming transatlantic relations, he wanted to transform Europe's security system.¹⁷ Even taking into account his global aspirations, the General's grand design was essentially Eurocentric. The Third World remained at the periphery of his design, confined as an area of competition for Great Powers keen to spread their spheres of influence.

This book argues for a Gaullist grand design by relying on an original methodology. Instead of focusing on various policy areas in isolation, it provides a comprehensive overview of French foreign policy that treats different geographic regions, as well as different spheres of the economy, political relations, and security, in the same analytical orbit. It explains how closely connected France's policies toward its Western allies became with its opening to the Eastern bloc, and how its strategy with regard to

the Third World became increasingly subordinated to Franco-American relations. It also underlines the close ties between France's security and monetary policies. By adopting this methodology, this book outlines a better understanding of de Gaulle's grand strategy.

Finally, this book suggests that the French president's grand design was far from quixotic, that it was not doomed to fail, but rather that de Gaulle made important mistakes that contributed to the undoing of his diplomatic agenda.¹⁸ It does so by approaching the General's foreign policy from an international perspective, drawing on wide-ranging archival research in France, the United Kingdom (U.K.), and the U.S., as well as private papers, interviews, and extensive secondary literature on France, Europe, and the Cold War. It places de Gaulle in his international historical context by arguing that as the Cold War system became more multipolar by the early 1960s, middle powers like France gained a greater margin of action. France could have a significant impact on the world stage during the 1960s because it took advantage of a more fluid international context, and because de Gaulle's ideas seemed in phase with the changes affecting the Cold War order. In other words, this is the story of the meeting of a man and a moment.

When de Gaulle returned to power in June 1958, he already boasted an illustrious career that had included leading the Free French during World War II. While the Cold War dominated international affairs, the General could draw inspiration from the main tenets of his political philosophy, which he had developed well before the emergence of the East-West conflict. These principles would shape his approach to the world stage and his diplomatic grand design during his presidency.

The General naturally placed France at the heart of his thinking. He believed France could only be itself in its rightful rank as a Great Power, and that in turn depended on establishing a strong leadership that could fiercely protect the state's independence in its actions. This commitment to France fit with another central aspect of de Gaulle's understanding of international affairs, as described by the U.S. ambassador to France, Charles Bohlen: "[The] fundamental and basic element in de Gaulle's foreign policy is his strongly held and unchangeable conviction that the nation (the state and not the people) represents the permanent unit in international affairs."¹⁹

De Gaulle ascribed a central role to the nation-state because of his understanding of history, which deeply influenced his overall thinking. He interpreted history as an essentially tragic developmental narrative, with violence and war as forces continually shaping the world. Amid such a tough environment, where only power counted, nations remained the main players of history and international life reflected the struggle be-

tween competing national interests, their opposition, or their temporary agreement.²⁰

Conversely, the General's emphasis on historical *longue durée* led him to downplay ideology, which he defined as "temporary and mortal,"²¹ and nowhere would this become more obvious than in de Gaulle's pragmatic attitude toward the Soviet Union and communism. His philosophy of history pushed him to believe in "Russia" and to call for dialogue with the country many times during his career, despite his firm opposition to communism.²²

When the German threat reemerged, he wrote to his mother in 1936 that Soviet Russia still provided the best fallback alliance for France, regardless of what one thought of its regime. Thirty years later, he would again refer to a "political and affectionate reality as old as our two countries [France and Russia], which is linked to their history and geography."²³ Ideological differences, for de Gaulle, did not impede cooperation if that suited the national interests of both parties, nor could ideological solidarity forever mask conflicting national policies.²⁴

Struggle equally played an intrinsic part in de Gaulle's vision of history, a Bergsonian competition in which nations—rather than ideologies—strove to flourish, and which required visionary leadership exercised by a strong state in order to succeed. But, alongside competition and leadership, balance also played a vital role in the General's philosophy.²⁵ Balance constituted a moral imperative for de Gaulle, who equally feared excessive power in states, because it almost always led to hubris, and excessive feebleness, because of his conviction that deference and weakness could become bad habits.²⁶

De Gaulle looked to historical precedents to support his belief in balance: "There was, though, a notion that was mentioned in no treaty and that is called equilibrium, and that was then the European equilibrium. All nations agreed tacitly to prevent anyone from acquiring excessive power at the expense of others. It is in the name of European equilibrium that Europe made war first to Louis XIV, then to the French Revolution, then to Napoleon. ... Thanks to this notion, smaller states like the Netherlands and Belgium had their existence guaranteed."²⁷

The quest for balance was intended as a means, not an end, and could be characterized in different ways by the General: a moderation of power, a refusal of hegemony and alignment, and the sharing of a community of values. All of these principles were aimed at achieving the end goal of peace, which depended on a continuous commitment to the idea of balance.²⁸ And from de Gaulle's perspective, balancing German power and solving the "German problem" appeared to be a vital precondition for peace and stability in Europe.

Thus, the fundamental pillars of de Gaulle's political philosophy—struggle, the deep influence of history, the notion of balance and the centrality of states in international affairs—predated the Cold War. This does not mean, however, that the General's ideas were not influenced by the onset of the East-West conflict. In 1947, for example, he worried about the danger posed by the Soviet Union's extension of its control over two-thirds of the European continent, and the fact that it controlled a bloc less than five hundred kilometers away from France's border.²⁹ Years later, when the threat seemed to fade away, he remained wary of the Soviet Union.

Nonetheless, the profound anchoring of the General's political philosophy in history shaped the fact he did not view the Cold War as a permanent state of affairs, or even a real break with the past. He increasingly came to regard the 1945 Yalta Conference as a catastrophe that had completely undermined the interests of France and Europe. Besides deciding Europe's fate without involving the European powers, Yalta was responsible, he believed, for dividing the continent into two blocs, thereby undermining the balance of the old European system.³⁰ But, driven by his views deeply rooted in history, de Gaulle believed that the legacy of Yalta could be undone, that the Cold War represented nothing more than a transient phenomenon that could and should be overcome.

De Gaulle's opposition to the Cold War and the bipolar order became more pronounced in the years before his return to power. Despite initially supporting the signing of the Atlantic Pact in 1949, he shifted to a more lukewarm stance during the 1950s, especially after the crisis surrounding the European Defence Community and the Suez Canal. He resented the objective deterioration of France's position within the Atlantic Alliance and the "subordination" of French leaders to their American counterparts.³¹ At the same time, the General lambasted Paris's failure to reach out to the other side of the Iron Curtain. Following his first reference in March 1950 to a Europe extending from the Atlantic to the Urals, he called on France to take a more active role in East-West affairs, seeing its position as "the most qualified historically, geographically and politically to create a bridge with the East."³²

While de Gaulle deplored the detrimental impact of the Cold War on France's status, he welcomed the fact that the risks of war in Europe seemed to be declining. Not only did he feel that the chances of a Soviet invasion of Western Europe were receding in the 1950s, as the Soviets faced internal challenges, but he also came to the conclusion that the superpowers were not willing to start a nuclear war, and if one did not resort to war, then one had to make peace sooner or later. This in turn, according to de Gaulle, undermined the main *raison d'être* of the existing military alliances in Europe.³³

Additionally, a number of signs suggested that the scales of power were tipping away from both superpowers, although the international order in the 1950s and 1960s remained structured around the U.S.-Soviet competition. The Cold War system was becoming more diffuse.³⁴ This applied first and foremost to the Atlantic Community. The dramatic recovery experienced by Western Europe in the first postwar decade raised a number of challenges for a transatlantic partnership that had initially rested on American military, economic, and monetary supremacy.³⁵

The creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957—a customs union that included France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg (the six)—symbolized the resurgence of the old continent, but also caused mixed reactions in the U.S. On the one hand, Washington welcomed regional integration as a way of strengthening the European economies and increasing their unity. On the other hand, it feared that the EEC might raise protectionist barriers, shut out U.S. exports, and undermine the cohesion of the Western Alliance.³⁶

The Western European economic revival also affected the international monetary system set up at Bretton Woods in 1944, which was centered on dollar-gold parity. By the late 1950s, the structural weaknesses of Bretton Woods were becoming apparent. U.S. international accounts were being drained by a variety of developments, including the country's overseas military commitments related to the Cold War, its support for free trade, and the European economic recovery that was pushing American companies to invest offshore. The world also depended on continued U.S. balance-of-payments deficits for the growth of its reserves, but an increase in the quantity of dollars in circulation carried the risk of fostering worldwide inflation and undermining international faith in the dollar.

Yet, if U.S. deficits were eliminated, the world would be deprived of its major source of reserve growth. In turn, this could put a limit on the overall amount of liquidity in the system, thereby hindering multiple transactions that had little to do with central bank reserves, such as international trade transactions, many of which are carried out in dollars. Many Europeans complained about these deficits and worried that they would lead Washington to end dollar convertibility. If this were to happen, the billions of dollars in foreign government treasuries would drastically decline in value. At the same time, European officials could not push the U.S. too far. The easiest way for the U.S. to end its balance-of-payments deficits was to eliminate or significantly decrease its defense commitments to Europe.³⁷

Tied to this, the erosion of the credibility of the American nuclear deterrent posed a serious dilemma for the transatlantic Alliance. Once the Soviet Union developed Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBM) in 1957, American territory was no longer invulnerable to Soviet nuclear attacks.

This raised the question of whether the U.S. government was still prepared to sacrifice, for instance, New York to defend Hamburg. That was the heart of the problem, and one that prompted Washington to switch NATO's nuclear strategy from one of massive retaliation to flexible response. It hoped to reduce the Alliance's dependence on nuclear weapons and develop a variety of responses to any Soviet invasion, which included a buildup of the member-states' conventional capabilities in warfare. Yet, for many Europeans, this appeared to be a sign that the U.S. was decoupling itself from the defense of Western Europe.³⁸

While de Gaulle welcomed Western Europe's resurgence, he also anticipated that changes within the Eastern bloc would one day make it favorable to *détente*.³⁹ He outlined his perspective during a press conference in November 1959: the Soviet leaders understood the dangers created by nuclear weapons and the need for peace; the Russian people aspired to freedom and a better life; and Moscow could see the desire for independence among the peoples of Eastern Europe who craved emancipation without necessarily wanting to give up their social regime. Moreover, the General believed that the communist camp would fragment because of the likely rivalry between Russia and communist China. Considering all these factors, he reached the conclusion that the communist world could not escape fundamental change.⁴⁰

Thus, when de Gaulle returned to office in June 1958, he was determined to reclaim France's Great Power status and optimistic about the prospects of overcoming the Cold War order in Europe. He came back to office with a clear grand design that focused first on restoring French independence, especially in the military field. As he made clear in his famous September 1958 memorandum to U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, "France cannot consider that NATO, in its current form, satisfies the conditions of the security of the Free World and, especially, its own security."⁴¹ Instead, he called for a reform of the Atlantic Alliance through the establishment of a tripartite directorate. When Eisenhower and Macmillan failed to follow up on his suggestion, the General began to progressively disengage French troops from NATO's integrated military structure.⁴²

De Gaulle hoped that a stronger France could help create a new balance in Europe that would overcome the Cold War divide. That implied, initially, the development of a more independent Western Europe. Thus, Paris accepted the Rome Treaty and fully invested itself in the development of the EEC. This partly reflected economic self-interest, since France hoped to guarantee the establishment of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) as compensation for the creation of a common industrial market. Yet, de Gaulle also saw the EEC as a means to achieve his long-held ob-