The Changing Status of German Reunification in Western Diplomacy, 1955-1966

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Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

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The skepticism of the de Gaulle government toward talks with the Russians on anything short of a full German settlement in 1959 became outright opposition to any negotiations at all under pressure during Kennedy’s efforts in 1961–62. Commenting on the test ban and optimism about additional great-power agreements, the French President expressed his intention to offer constructive proposals when the day of sincere détente had arrived, but stressed that “for the time being, France will not subscribe to any arrangement that would be made above her head and which would concern Europe and particularly Germany.” The French were Germany’s staunchest supporters in making Europe practically off-limits to the Anglo-American search for next steps.

In the rapprochement with Bonn coming to fruition at this time, there was a frankly acknowledged element of French self-interest. Consistently de Gaulle had rejected the idea of a neutralized Central Europe in terms of France’s simple security from attack, and on the occasion of the Friendship Treaty he extolled Franco-German cooperation as “the most basic factor in the security of our continent and perhaps, in the future, of balance and peace among the nations that people our continent from East to

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West." As much as Dulles, Eden, and Adenauer, de Gaulle felt that West German defection into neutralism would turn the precarious balance decidedly against the West. As much as they, he envisioned the Franco-German reconciliation as an indispensable cornerstone for the greater tasks of building an independent Western Europe and eventually arriving at an all-European settlement, part of which must include German reunification through free elections. But de Gaulle objected to the way traditional Western premises concerning Germany and Europe were being applied in the early 1960's. Uppermost in his mind was the need to explore the possibilities of a lasting East-West accord and, in this regard, he considered German-American policies, in particular, misguided and potentially self-defeating.

Two things, in the French view, prevented the establishment of a more flexible and just equilibrium in Europe: the deadweight of bipolarity, due in part to the American preponderance in the West, and the specter of a German revival. American and West German policy on nuclear sharing, as exemplified by the MLF proposal, had the disastrous consequence of perpetuating both factors simultaneously by prolonging American hegemony and intensifying the fear of Germany. While it is a moot and perhaps decisive question whether de Gaulle was ever willing or able to offer Bonn a substitute for the American nuclear guarantee that the MLF was supposed to cement, it is central to the theme of German reunification in allied diplomacy to note that the French

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President thought that Atlantic nuclear sharing would complicate indefinitely all attempts to build an independent or even semi-independent center of defense in West Europe, a condition he felt was needed to permit a degree of American withdrawal from continental affairs in the course of settling with the Soviets over Central Europe.

The Americans tended increasingly to value the MLF for the limited purpose of assuring Germany's loyalty to the original alliance. The French, concerned primarily with the effects of NATO policies on East-West relations, stressed the obstacles the arrangement would present for realizing the ultimate aim of ending the continental division. Both governments considered such a settlement a distant prospect at best, but de Gaulle felt more strongly that the need for a more perfect European order should be constantly proclaimed, and that the relationship between short-term expedients and long-term aspirations should never be neglected. These beliefs led during 1964 to the vigorous French campaign against the MLF and the surprisingly blunt recital of the inadequacies of Franco-German cooperation as prescribed in the Friendship Treaty. Gaullist diplomacy set about to demonstrate to Bonn and Washington through independent pronouncements and initiatives what it considered to be the proper approach to a real détente on the continent.

Characteristic of the whole enterprise was the lack of any hesitancy to recall publicly that support for West Germany was not unconditional. French interests were defined as three:

- to see that Germany henceforth becomes a definite element of progress and peace; on this condition, to help with its
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reunification; to make a start and select the framework which would make this possible.¹⁴

Kennedy's allusion in 1961 to joint Soviet-American interests in the event of a German revival had held the same ring; the difference lay in the fact that the American President sought to stabilize the situation by coupling arms limitations on the Federal Republic with a Berlin agreement, whereas de Gaulle felt that tinkering with the modalities of the political division would only prolong tension and the concomitant great-power presence. His framework for a German solution was at once more broad than Kennedy's during the Berlin crisis and more precise than that which American policy after Cuba considered possible or worth mentioning. A text for further comments on the French conception of the sequence and substance of a settlement is provided by de Gaulle's most comprehensive statement on the issues involved at his February, 1965, press conference:

Oh, doubtless, one can imagine things continuing as they are for a long time without provoking...a general conflagration, since the reciprocal nuclear deterrence is succeeding in preventing the worst. But it is clear that real peace and, even more, fruitful relations between East and West, will not be established so long as the German anomalies, the concern they cause and the suffering they entail continue. It is no less clear that, unless there is fighting...this matter will not be settled by the direct confrontation of ideologies and forces of the two camps....What must be done will not be done, one day, except by the un-

derstanding and combined action of the peoples who have always been, who are and who will remain principally concerned by the fate of the German neighbor—in short, the European peoples. For those peoples to envisage first examining together, then settling in common, and lastly guaranteeing conjointly the solution to a question which is essentially that of their continent—that is the only way that can make reappear, this the only link that can maintain, a Europe in a state of equilibrium, peace and cooperation. . . . the success of such a vast and difficult undertaking implies many conditions. Russia must evolve in such a way that it sees its future . . . through progress accomplished in common by free men and peoples. The nations which it has satellized must be able to play their role in a renewed Europe. It must be recognized, first of all by Germany, that any settlement of which it would be the subject would necessarily imply a settlement of its frontiers and of its armament in agreement with all its neighbors, those on the East and those on the West. The six nations which, let us hope, are in the process of establishing the economic community of Western Europe, must succeed in organizing themselves in the political domain as well as in that of defense, in order to make a new equilibrium possible on our continent.15

Central here was the conviction that the division was unbearable because of the suffering it caused and the political progress it prevented, not because the danger of war was acute. Sophisticated arms control measures to defuse the situation, such as the Americans had advocated were considered both unnecessary, given the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence, and, at bottom, irrelevant, given the political roots of tension.

More significant was de Gaulle’s emphasis on the European peoples as “primarily concerned.” This implied more than simply the irrelevance of Ameri-

15 Ibid.
can ideas; it seemed to denigrate the necessity of the United States taking any direct and primary role in the actual deliberation, negotiation, or enforcement of a settlement. This belief had its most concrete manifestation in French policy toward NATO but entered the reunification debate in the May, 1965, hassle between France and the allies over a declaration endorsing German unity, in which the French wanted a formulation distinguishing European and American interests. The minor episode was symptomatic of de Gaulle’s major difficulty: persuading the allies to consider a model of European order other than the modified bipolar system rooted in Western plans and interim policies.

Reference to the regulation of German borders and arms in an East-West forum contained again the narrow European focus thought unwise by the allies, as well as a lamentable lack of precision, in Bonn’s view, about the time and place of such concessions. It is almost universally acknowledged that renunciation of the Oder-Neisse territories and strict limitations on German arms will be the condition of any reunification settlement, but only de Gaulle, on this and even more specifically on other occasions, pointedly said so in semi-official announcements, omitting the standard reference to one grand peace conference. Whatever the immediate repercussions of such gestures to the East on Franco-German cooperation in building the more independent Western Europe that French policy clearly understands as the basis for wider continental accords, de Gaulle held considered candor essential in the meantime lest the progressive consolidation in the West prolong suspicions and hold the East-West rapprochement in abeyance. These unorthodox gestures increased dur-
ing 1965, to be climaxed by the even more dramatic actions of the following year—France's withdrawal from NATO integration, and de Gaulle's visit to Moscow.

These French policies seemed to the majority of policy-makers in Britain, Germany, and America to place the whole structure of postwar Western diplomacy in jeopardy. The secession from NATO seemed designed to diminish the alliance's effectiveness to such a degree that the Soviets would be induced to make a separate deal with the French over the future status of the continent. France's allies forgot that the British had gone unilaterally to Moscow in 1959, and in 1961 had counseled negotiations in a time of utmost tension while denying the need to raise the military ante. They forgot that the Americans, too, had sought high level talks without an increase in military outlays in 1959 and later under Kennedy had pushed on with bilateral negotiations in spite of French and German reluctance. De Gaulle's maverick course in 1966 was seen as a unique threat to the traditional means of allied policy—a strong NATO—and as a unique departure from its traditional procedure—unity in dealing with the enemy.

And yet the Moscow venture showed, even if in radically altered circumstances from the Geneva meetings of a decade before, that the essentially political fact of the German division still remained the core problem of the East-West conflict, the acknowledged and unchanged issue by which to test the possibility of far-reaching changes. What had Dulles done eleven years earlier but play his record on Germany while the Soviets played theirs?

De Gaulle was willing to travel alone, to ostracize
himself from Western officialdom on the questions of the alliance's strength and structure and the size and strength of a future Germany, but he was not willing to abandon the goal of reunification on the basis of self-determination. Indeed, he was far less ready than American and British governments in the past to consider makeshift arrangements that endangered the goal by lending legitimacy to the East German regime, although his statements could easily be construed to imply a most evolutionary view of how the division would be overcome. No more than Adenauer, Macmillan, or Kennedy before him was he able to solve the issue alone. But in 1966 he had become the Western statesman for whom an agreement on Germany was a pressing necessity, and he had a deeper grasp of the essentials of the problem and the limits of political compromise in arranging a settlement than any allied leaders except the Germans. Leaving aside the question of ultimate motives, the complicated and ambiguous relationship between the French and European aspects of de Gaulle's design, we can say for our purposes that he was as diplomatically interested in progress toward reunification as any Western statesman before him. His endeavors testified to the enduring if not exclusive presence of German reunification in Western diplomacy.