

'Towards military neutrality' from Le Monde (18 December 1964)

Caption: On 18 December 1964, the French daily newspaper Le Monde considers the likelihood and the implications of French military neutrality vis-à-vis the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

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Towards military neutrality

By Maurice Duverger

France's opposition to the plans for a multilateral force would carry more weight if it did not restrict itself to haughty refusals. Paris has the means to exert a strong influence on the negotiations that are under way. But they need to use them while there is still time.

On an abstract level, two alternative policies that are diametrically opposed may be imagined. The first would consist in bartering the abandonment of our national strike force. It will have to be done one day, come what may. At a certain level, the financial cost of atomic weapons becomes such that a country of our size can no longer bear it. If the British are now giving up their strike force, it is because it has already reached that cut-off point. We may talk about whether we shall reach it in 1970 or 1975. But that is not important. What is important is that we shall unavoidably reach that point one day. It is hardly an exaggeration to describe the stalemate in our current nuclear policy as follows: we can have a national bomb while it is not effective; once it becomes effective, it can no longer remain national.

It appears that the time is now right for us to negotiate the best deal for the integration of our nuclear weapons into a common defence force. In a few years, smaller nations might well have their own bombs, which would reduce the prestige of such devices. On the other hand, the gap is steadily growing between the two nuclear giants and other countries with nuclear capabilities, just like the gap between the developed and the developing countries.

Washington is too opposed to the proliferation of nuclear weapons to avoid paying the fairly expensive price of including France into this policy. De Gaulle will perhaps not obtain the three-member board of directors that he has always wanted. But he could hardly be refused the privileged position that they had been ready to give him in Nassau. Many different possibilities have opened up in this regard, some of them more Atlantic in nature and others more European. All of them involve a U-turn compared with current French policy: but not more radical than by Great Britain's U-turn when it changed its attitude towards the Common Market. It is only natural for solutions to change when the problems have been redefined.

Undoubtedly, the Federal Republic would strongly oppose such French pretensions. But it is doubtful that it would find any real support in Europe. Aside from Bonn, few of the Old World's capital cities have demonstrated any enthusiasm for the multilateral force. If France were to give up its nuclear isolation, it would give rise to such satisfaction throughout our continent and in Washington that Germany would have difficulty in ruining the renewal of France's Western ties. If one has never stopped lamenting the absence of the prodigal son, one can hardly refuse to kill the fatted calf in order to ensure that he comes home.

Chances are slim that General de Gaulle would engage in such a policy. He is too attached to his national bomb. Some people think that he is contemplating an altogether different policy: leaving NATO, should the multilateral force come into being, and adopting a position of neutrality. This possibility is met with disapproval, even among members of the left-wing opposition. It is thought that neutrality would put France at the mercy of the USSR by stripping it of American military protection. Such a judgement is too simplistic. Neutrality raises serious objections. But it is not an absurd or unrealistic policy. The problem merits close examination.

On this matter, we should consider the opinion of one of the most brilliant American specialists in international relations, whose authority is highly respected in the United States, Dr Kissinger: *'None of the major nuclear powers can accept a spectacular advance over the other, whether or not the region where it happened is officially protected by an alliance. Neutral India, at the time of the Chinese attack, was not less assured of American aid than allied Pakistan would have been in similar circumstances. Accordingly, the distinction between allied and neutral countries tends to become blurred. A country has little to gain by being an ally and runs little risk in being neutral.'* A militarily neutral France could be just as well protected by America's nuclear umbrella, and in less danger, than a France that was a member of NATO.

Military neutrality would not entail the abandonment of the Common Market. Nothing in the Treaty of Rome requires the Six countries to be members of NATO or to remain members. Switzerland or Austria could enter into the European Economic Community if they wanted – and many Westerners hope that they do. It is even possible to argue that a neutral France would be in a better position than a France that depended on NATO to attempt 'to eliminate the fences that divide Europe' in its policy towards the East, which is a fundamental objective of the EEC according to the preamble of the Treaty that instituted it. At all events, there is no likelihood that France's five partners would ever expel France from the Common Market as a punishment for a possible break from NATO. They would have neither the legal power to do it, nor would it be in their best economic interests.

Military neutrality will no longer entail withdrawal from Western democratic institutions. Neither Switzerland nor Austria has withdrawn from them. Even Finland, a member of the Soviet bloc, maintains them. Conversely, Portugal's participation in NATO has not made it more democratic. The political system of a country depends on its level of socio-economic development and on its cultural traditions rather than on its military alliances.

We are not claiming here that neutrality is a better policy than the Atlantic Alliance. We simply wish to demonstrate that such a policy is not inconceivable and that it should be taken seriously: withdrawing from NATO would not be like Samson demolishing the columns of the temple and burying himself beneath the rubble. Besides, there is no evidence to prove that General de Gaulle has decided to go down this path. Rumours of this are grounded only in theoretical suppositions or vague evidence. The rumours are not consistent enough to affect our allies and to turn them away from a multilateral force. There again, silence is not golden. If the French Government intends to leave NATO, should the multilateral force come into being, they should state it clearly.

Keeping quiet would only be advantageous in one particular situation: if de Gaulle was determined to opt for neutrality anyway. Then the multilateral force would provide an excellent pretext for shifting responsibility for the break on to our allies and regaining the support of the public. It does not appear that this is the real motive behind France's current inertia in the face of negotiations between its Atlantic partners. It is more probably the result of the General's empiricism.