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The decision to return to NATO's Integrated Military Structures (IMS) is one of the major recent changes in France's defence policy. It was announced by President Nicolas Sarkozy in August 2007. One of 12 founding members of NATO France left the IMS in 1966. The then French President Charles de Gaulle protested against the American domination in the organisation and what he perceived as a special relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom. Charles de Gaulle wanted to create a tripartite directorate that would put France on an equal footing with the US and the UK. His idea was not met with enthusiasm within the Alliance and de Gaulle made a dramatic decision.

Since 1966 French armed forces have not participated in NATO's integrated military command. All non-French NATO troops had to leave the territory of France and the SHAPE's headquarter was relocated from Paris to Mons in Belgium, where it still remains. However, France stayed as a member of the Alliance, notably its political structures, continued to contribute troops to NATO and committed itself to the defence of Europe.

After France's withdrawal from the IMS, the Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreement defined the parameters of military cooperation between France and NATO. This agreement was a balancing act between the then Chief of Staff of the French Army General Ailleret, who was insisting on complete withdrawal of French troops from NATO's integrated military command, and the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) General Lemnitzer, whose goal was to reduce the impact of the withdrawal of French troops, especially from the French Zone of Germany (FRG), because of the Soviet threat from the Eastern Europe. In terms of numbers, the French contribution in the FRG remained unchanged. Moreover, under the Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreement, French forces went from merely defensive to a counteroffensive role that was certainly more valuable for Allied defence. The Ailleret-Lemnitzer agreement was kept secret for almost 20 years and is still treated with great discretion in order to preserve the image of France's autonomy acquired by breaking with Atlantic integration.

France's rapprochement with NATO began in 1995 with the return to the NATO's Military Committee. This body is an integral part of the policy and decision-making apparatus of the Alliance. It is responsible for overseeing the development of NATO's military policy and doctrine. Since joining NATO's Military Committee, France has intensified working relations with the military structure. It has actively participated in the Allied Command Transformation, created during the 2002 NATO Prague Summit, and has supplied troops to the NATO Response Force.

Today France is present in a large number of NATO structures, with the exception of the Nuclear Planning Group, the Defense Planning Committee and the Integrated Chain of Command. The last two are the most important in the current debate. The first one, the Nuclear Planning Group, is not on the agenda, and it is highly unlikely that France will consider joining it

in the short-term future. It is crucial for France to retain its total independence in nuclear sphere.

The Defense Planning Committee is responsible for operational and strategic planning. This forum deals with the majority of defence matters and subjects related to the integrated military structure. It is a body where strategic decisions are made. If France wants to influence those decisions made by NATO, it has to join this Committee.

While the decision of France's return to NATO's IMS can wait till the 2009 NATO summit, the situation in Afghanistan deteriorates. In February 2008 the Canadian Government promised to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan unless they received help in the dangerous southern part of the country Kandahar province, where they were based. Sarkozy announced the decision to send 700 additional soldiers to Afghanistan. This is an important aspect of the Sarkozy's decision to rejoin NATO's IMS, as France has always disagreed with NATO's strategy in Afghanistan, but could never influence it, because, as was mentioned above, France is not a part of the Defence Planning Committee. Thus, sending additional troops to Afghanistan, even before the final decision of the French return to the IMS is made, is, undoubtedly, a gesture that expects a compromise from NATO in return. It is an open question what this compromise would be, but taking into account the situation in Afghanistan and the need for more troops, NATO isn't left with much space for manoeuvre.

Between April and October 2008 France increased the number of its troops from 1,430 to 2,300. Latest figure of French forces under the NATO-led mission, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) command, is 2,785. However, after the developments last month, when a group calling itself Revolutionary Front for Afghanistan left bombs in the Paris department store "Printemps" and demanded the withdrawal of all French troops from Afghanistan, the Defence Minister Hervé Morin announced that France has no intention of increasing the number of troops in Afghanistan.

The French public did not accept the Sarkozy's decision with ease. Charles de Gaulles is very special for many French. Any decision that contradicts Charles de Gaulles's policies is highly unlikely to win a popular vote among the French people. Sarkozy did not receive much support in the Assemblée Nationale either. The candidate for the 2007 French presidential elections and the leader of the Union for French Democracy François Bayrou said of France's return to IMS: "Staying out of the military structure of NATO France disposes the free, capable voice, like we had in Iraq, we restrained out of the pressure and made our own strategic choice". The former leader of the French Socialist Party François Hollande said the the decision to send military reinforcements to Afghanistan "under pressure from the Americans" means that France risks losing its independence on the world stage.

But even in his party, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), Sarkozy had made enemies. One of the UMP predecessor parties was de Gaulle's party – the Union des Démocrates pour la République (UDR) – , and therefore, it has a very strong Gaullist heritage. In eyes of many of the UMP's members Sarkozy has betrayed those traditions.

Other cautious reactions came from the EU member states who were not sure whether France's decision meant that the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) would no more longer

be a priority for France. Those worries, however, soon disappeared. France was thinking through its policies towards Europe, especially while preparing to its presidency in the EU in the second half of 2008. Now, with its presidency of the EU over, it is evident that a further development of the ESDP was one of the major priorities for France. It was France's attitude towards ESDP that brought about the question of France's role in NATO. Shortly after Sarkozy announced his determination to return to NATO's IMS, the French Defence Minister Hervé Morin said: "We will never progress in the ESDP if we do not clarify our position in NATO". The French President added "to be more European tomorrow, we have to be more Atlantic today".

At the NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Sarkozy confirmed his wish to rejoin NATO's IMS but only on the condition that the USA will drop its objections to a separate European defence project. In such a way Sarkozy has shown dedication to ESDP and determination to progress on the European defence policy, as any progress that France might make in terms of capabilities or its participation in NATO will help both the EU and the ESDP. The first response from the USA was made public by the US Ambassador in NATO Victoria Nuland, who said in her speech "Europe needs a place where it can act independently...". This phrase initiated a new era of the European defence project.

The France's ability to overcome America's objections to an autonomous European defence policy is a great achievement that will add value to France within the EU. One French diplomat noted that "overall the Americans are not hostile towards the more finalised European defence, but it is when we start discussing details, that things become more complicated". Progress on this question will be a crucial test for the Franco-American reconciliation.

The French Chief of Defence Staff Jean-Louis Georgelin underlines another reason why France should rejoin the integrated military structure of NATO. He explains that current French army needs the exchange of military technologies and NATO is the best source for it. Entering NATO's IMS requires the re-equipment of the armament, and the technological independence that France tried to keep is not relevant any more, while the level of the technology among the NATO countries is higher.

There are several advantages and disadvantages for the full NATO member states to have France back in the IMS. First of all, France is among the first four largest contributors to NATO's numbers and budgets. France is a good ally, it contributes to NATO more than the majority of other full members and while not being a member of IMS France still contributed troops and funding to NATO missions, including KFOR in Kosovo and ISAF in Afghanistan. French army has a very good reputation worldwide, it is experienced and well-trained, and has expeditionary capabilities.

One of the reasons why some full NATO member states would not like to see France joining the IMS is the job allocation. France will bring from 500 to 800 military personnel to NATO who would take jobs currently held by other member states.

Another point for NATO to consider is that France has a tradition of independent foreign policy. France could (and possibly will) block NATO's decisions when it is back in the Defence Planning Committee. It is a big question whether it will contribute to the further development of

NATO or hinder it. Of course, nobody should expect that France will come back to NATO's IMS for nothing. It will need a special place - France would not agree on a junior position.

Without much of a debate, Sarkozy's decision looks inevitable. It would not surprise anybody to see France back at its chair in the Defence Planning Committee and back on the ground in the NATO's integrated missions. However, we should not expect an easy and painless transformation inside the organisation itself and we still have to see whether the green light from the USA will give a boost to an independent European defence project.