

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

NATO and France

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Q1: Why did France leave NATO's integrated military structures in the first place and why has France decided to reintegrate into NATO this year?

A1: At General Charles de Gaulle's urging, France left NATO's integrated military structure in 1966 to maintain its own independent defense policy. Since then, however, France has continued to participate in NATO's political structures and make sizeable and important contributions to NATO's ongoing missions, particularly in Kosovo and Afghanistan. France has also committed itself to alliance transformation efforts such as the NATO Response Force (NRF).

In 1995, at the beginning of Jacques Chirac's presidency, France contemplated reintegration into NATO's military structures. But after two years of difficult negotiations over changes to NATO command structures and the arrival of Lionel Jospin as prime minister, the idea was taken off the table. Nevertheless, the French government had already started resuming its full presence in the NATO Military Committee.

Over the last two decades, NATO has changed significantly. Its membership and missions have expanded, and with it, so too have French contributions. Given France's active role in NATO, President Nicolas Sarkozy's administration may decide to match France's formal status in the alliance with its actual contributions. Many of the original obstacles both inside France and among NATO members have been removed in recent years. Questions over NATO commands are far less contentious than in years past and concerns over France's independence can be easily addressed. For example, no French troops will be under permanent allied command in peacetime. If desired, France could also remain outside of the Nuclear Planning Group, preserving the independence of its deterrent force.

Q2: What will this change mean for the United States and transatlantic relations?

A2: Some analysts in Washington predict that France's full reintegration into NATO will translate into an alignment of U.S. and French policies. This will not necessarily be the case. Instead, Washington should expect that, on issues such as disarmament or enlargement, France will maintain its distinct positions, which are sometimes in direct contradiction with U.S. views. Paris may also try to maximize its influence within the alliance and seek to design a more deliberative decisionmaking process.

In Europe, some analysts there fear that Paris will soften its ambitions for—and dedicate fewer resources to—a stronger European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) inside the European Union. On the contrary, Sarkozy's team hopes that this move will ease suspicions about ESDP inside NATO and among NATO member states such as the United States and the United Kingdom. This new climate could lead to enhanced EU-NATO ties and enhance transatlantic relations more broadly.

Q3: What will NATO have to offer in exchange? Will this alter France's influence in NATO?

A3: It is important to remember that France will make this decision on its own. The alliance is not trying to persuade the French to reintegrate. Therefore, NATO has not been asked to present a package of concessions in exchange for this French decision. However, France's reintegration would certainly trigger discussions about high-level posts in NATO's integrated command structures, which would be settled in the weeks and months ahead.

Ultimately, France's influence inside NATO will be driven by its continuing contributions to NATO missions, its vision for NATO's future role in global security, its input into the next Strategic Concept, and its contributions to ongoing NATO reform efforts.

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