

CHARLES DE GAULLE AND HIS “EUROPE OF NATIONS”

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Introduction

Charles De Gaulle (1890-1970) was France's President from 1958 to 1969 after leading the resistance movement known as the 'Free French Forces' during World War Two. When he became France's head of state, he devised a new constitution which founded the French Fifth Republic that lasts to this day. His idea of France being an independent great power influenced his policy towards European integration as he envisaged a continental confederation that would become a third superpower after the US and the USSR. Worried about the decline of national influence in the European Economic Community (EEC), De Gaulle proposed the Fouchet Plan, a blueprint for the formation of an intergovernmental union of nation-states. While it was never implemented because other countries were unenthusiastic, the Fouchet Plan endures as an inspiring document for a democratic European alternative. It also demonstrated De Gaulle's forward thinking and the significance of cooperation between different countries in an increasingly interconnected world (Project for Democratic Union, 2013). This research piece will aim to explain the French President's ideal European confederation and how he tried to make it a reality.

De Gaulle's background

Charles De Gaulle fought as a lieutenant in World War One and became a brigadier general at the onset of World War Two, a rank that he retained for the rest of his life. After the former Great War hero Marshal Philippe Pétain had taken charge of France in order to sign an armistice with Nazi Germany, De Gaulle fled to the UK, where he led the Free French Forces against the Axis powers and collaborators like Pétain. He was completely devoted to his country and had the strength of character to fight for French national interests. His broadcasts from London, the actions of the Free French Forces and the contacts of French resistance groups either with De Gaulle's organisation or the British secret services brought national recognition of his leadership. However, his relationship with the British government was uneasy (Pickles, 2019). De Gaulle was interested in re-creating the French state and in pursuing this objective he acted like an "awkward customer" with the other Allied statesmen (Duroselle, 1966:3-4). Winston Churchill, the British prime minister, recognised the French general's greatness and overlooked the irritations he frequently caused. The US president Roosevelt, on the other hand, did not understand him at all and disregarded De Gaulle's popularity in France. The French general misunderstood the American leader too, hence the roots of De Gaulle's anti-Americanism can be traced to this period (Ibid).

From September 1944 until January 1946 he headed two successive provisional administrations before returning to power as French head of state in 1958. Eleven years later he resigned after losing a referendum on constitutional reforms (Pickles, 2019).

The Gaullist vision of a united Europe

It had been the French general's ambition since 1940 to get together "the states which border the Rhine, the Alps and the Pyrenees" as "one of the three global powers and, if necessary one day, the arbiter between the Soviet and Anglo-Saxon camps" in global politics (Teasdale, 2016:7). A unified, powerful Europe in international affairs was essential to De Gaulle's political thought. As long as individual countries could maintain separate military structures and exercise the right to veto during the decision-making process, common defence and foreign policies could be valuable to France's rebirth as a major power. Europe therefore could be used as a platform from which France could project an influence beyond its capacity as a single state and in which Paris could lead the other nation-states and act as their spokesperson in the wider world (Ibid).

In an attempt to define the former French president's hypothetical Europe, J.B. Duroselle (1966) identified four key characteristics: a Europe of independent states with no supranational authority; a Europe free from American influence; a Europe in which the dominant power in foreign policy would be France; and a Europe open to its Eastern neighbours, i.e. the Soviet Union and its satellite states.

A Europe of independent states with no supranational authority

From the standpoint of De Gaulle, any coherent Europe had to be a union of independent states in which national sovereignty would always control the European institutions and could only be the outcome of cooperation between individual countries. According to Ronald Tiersky (2016), Gaullism, which he considers to be the first form of euroscepticism, is the idea that the fundamental unit of international politics is a nation-state built on people with a particular history. In De Gaulle's mind, the nation-state was genuine and a factitious organisation run by faceless bureaucrats could never replace it (Ibid). Therefore, from his perspective, states are bound to survive ideologies and cannot be absorbed or merged into something larger and supranational (Duroselle, 1966). A federalised Europe could never work because a federal entity could not express a will that is acceptable to all members of the EEC (Mammarella & Cacace, 1998).

The General's alternative to supranational/federal institutions was a confederal/intergovernmental union. His deep-rooted nationalism meant that he despised any schemes for international order that were not based on coherent nation-states. During a press conference held in 1962 he stated that "the only possible Europe...is that of states" (Moravcsik, 2000:12-13). De Gaulle opposed the pooling and delegation of sovereignty in the form of qualified majority voting or commission autonomy. He often described the debate over European integration as a battle between the "utopian myths [of] supranational power" and the vision of a confederation in which France would not have to face the possibility of being overruled on social, economic and political matters, as in the EEC (Ibid).

As early as 1947, the General had spoken of the need to establish a European 'federation' based on the primacy of the sovereign nation state. In 1950 his long-time confidant Michel Debré clarified this notion into that of a confederation and over the next few years the Gaullist leadership developed their alternative to the supranational blueprint of the Founding Six (France, Italy, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, West Germany). Later, in 1953 De Gaulle drew upon these ideas in asserting his plans for European cooperation. He once remarked that there should be an association of nations that would involve a

regular and organic council comprising all heads of governments who would make decisions on politics, economics, culture and defence; a deliberative assembly and a referendum held in all member states that would involve the people and ensure that the confederation had popular legitimacy (Teasdale, 2016).

In essence De Gaulle wanted to impose his view of a “political Europe” as opposed to supranational institutions that would allow the European continent to be ruled by technocrats without a mandate and specialists without spirit or vision. The French general thought that technical rule would negate every form of human greatness based on the ability to develop new courses of action and assume responsibility for the consequences (Mações, 2018). However, even though he was critical of the excessive power held by the Brussels bureaucracy, which in his opinion had no national legitimacy, he supported the aims of the Common Market, while defending French national interests (Mammarella & Cacace, 1998). So he devoted himself to the implementation of the 1957 Treaty of Rome (the founding document of the EEC) and called for the deregulation of trade resulting from this accord to be subordinated by the creation of a common agricultural and customs policy. The enactment of such policies contributed to the modernisation of French industry and agriculture (Sirinelli, Vandenbussche & Vavasseur-Desperriers, 2003).

A Europe free from American influence

De Gaulle had been suspicious of the United States ever since he met Roosevelt in 1943 at the Casablanca conference. He believed that the US had “yielded to the spirit of intervention” and that its president wanted an “American peace” dictated on his (Roosevelt’s) terms (Duroselle, 1966:6). Although De Gaulle was in favour of the Western Alliance, he never hesitated to denounce America’s interventionist tendencies (Ibid).

Those who study European integration learn that it began with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). However, as the former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis (2011) highlighted, European integration was in reality a concept implemented by American diplomacy. De Gaulle saw this clearly and when the ECSC was formed he denounced it on the basis that it was creating a unified Europe in the shape of a restrictive cartel under Washington’s influence. This is why he and his associates voted against the formation of the ECSC in the French parliament (Teasdale, 2016). His anti-Atlanticism also explains why he opposed the European Defence Community, which envisaged a supranational European defence structure under NATO control (Ibid), and instead preferred an alliance of independent states with a combined General Staff (Anceau, 2016). This line of thought is linked to his rejection of supranationalism as he once remarked that “a supranational Europe is a Europe under American command” (Ibid).

In his attempt to reduce American influence on the continent, De Gaulle withdrew France from NATO’s integrated military structure in 1966 (Moravcsik, 2000). He also vetoed Britain’s entry into the EEC twice in 1963 and 1967 because he regarded “perfidious Albion” as a US Trojan Horse (Anceau, 2016). In essence, the French president envisioned an independent Europe that would act as a ‘third force’ between the United States and the USSR (Mammarella & Cacace, 1998). He was a unique figure in the context of the Cold War, as he was one of the few European leaders who took a non-aligned stance.

A Europe dominated by France

In the General's head, European integration was also a means of ensuring France's place in the world (Anceau, 2016). He believed that every state should follow an independent policy to seek their rightful place in the world. France, in his view, was supposed to become a "principal player" on the global stage (Moravcsik, 2000:9). So, although he contributed much to European integration, he always advanced the interests and augmented the prestige of his country (Djilas, 2010). De Gaulle desired a Europe dominated by France in which Germany would be politically subordinate, but at the same time a strong economic partner (Williams, 1997). Unlike Britain, West Germany could not aspire to compete politically and culturally with France, and so the French president developed a partnership with the German chancellor Konrad Adenauer, culminating in a friendship treaty being signed in early 1963 (Sirinelli, Vandenbussche & Vavasseur-Desperriers, 2003). Afterwards, Franco-German relations became strained because of Adenauer's Atlanticist successors. This policy is considered to be another reason for De Gaulle's blocking the UK's accession into the EEC, as Britain was seen as an obstacle to French influence (Anceau, 2016).



A Europe open to the East

De Gaulle viewed Europe as a product of history and geography, transcending artificial and ephemeral divisions. In 1959 he famously stated that "it is Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals ... which will decide the fate of the world". He regarded historical and geographical Europe as a way of combining and increasing the power of each nation-state in order to play a prominent role on the global scene (Ibid). He followed a policy of détente and cooperation with the Soviet bloc by encouraging trade and cultural relations with the USSR and its satellite states (Pickles, 2019). The French president correctly foresaw the collapse of the communist regimes and believed that afterwards Western Europe (led by France) would reintegrate the continent (Djilas, 2010). Nevertheless, his theory of 'de-satellisation' was invalidated in the short-term by the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Furthermore, as the political and economic crisis of May 1968 demonstrated, France had neither the domestic cohesion nor the financial resources to play the role of leader in De Gaulle's idealised Europe (Pickles, 2019).

The first Fouchet Plan (1961)

In 1961, a committee headed by Christian Fouchet, the French ambassador to Denmark, produced a draft treaty for the establishment of a 'union of states', now known as the first Fouchet Plan (Teasdale, 2016).

The document envisaged a common defence and foreign policy, close cooperation in the fields of culture and science and the protection of human rights and democracy. This hypothetical Union included three main institutions: the Council, the European Parliament and the European Political Commission. The Council would comprise the heads of state or government of each member country who would meet every four months and all decisions had to be unanimous. The European Parliament is the one that already existed at the time and its role would be to "deliberate on matters concerning the aims of the Union" and to submit questions and recommendations to the Council (CVCE, n.d.). The European

Political Commission would consist of senior officials from the Foreign Affairs ministries of each member state. It would be based in Paris and would deal with the deliberations of the Council and implement its decisions (Ibid).

The reaction to these proposals was mixed. West Germany, Italy and Luxembourg suggested that they could work with the text, whilst seeking additional guarantees with regard to the importance of NATO (even though the draft treaty acknowledged that the Union's defence policy would be conducted "with other free nations", i.e. with the US-led military alliance) and the integrity of the existing EEC. However, the Netherlands and Belgium opposed the first Plan. They had serious reservations about the proposed intergovernmental union and its defence provisions. In addition, they thought that the UK should participate in the discussions, and if that was not possible, then negotiations should be postponed until it had joined the Community. The head of the British negotiating team, Edward Heath, indicated that his country supported the idea of a political union and that it would be willing to take part in the debates. De Gaulle eventually met with Harold Macmillan, the UK premier, to clarify the British position. It was revealed, much to the dismay of the Dutch and the Belgians, that Britain preferred the intergovernmental approach to defence and foreign policy, and also that it was not necessary for its representatives to participate in the negotiations (Teasdale, 2016).

The Second Fouchet Plan (1962)

The discussions witnessed a stalemate in late 1961 and the prospects of success for De Gaulle were decreasing. Although most EEC member states agreed with the first Plan, he needed the backing of the Netherlands and Belgium for its implementation. Later in January 1962 a revised Plan was tabled. It was marked by a hardening of the French position, thus accentuating the intergovernmental character of the Union and its ability to act independently without American consent (Ibid). As a matter of fact, Article 2 of the second Fouchet Plan stated that the objective of the Union would be "to reconcile, co-ordinate and unify the policy of member states in spheres of common interest: foreign policy, economics, cultural affairs and defence" (CVCE, n.d.). Other major changes included: the creation of a Committee of Foreign Ministers and a Committee of Ministers of Education that would report to the Council; a Political Commission comprising delegates appointed by each member state which could draft the Union's budget; and the possibility of the European Parliament to "deliberate on questions concerning foreign policy, defence and education on which the Council asks its opinion" (Ibid).

What distinguishes the Fouchet Plan from all previous EU reforms is that De Gaulle wished to establish a strong executive that would make decisions on important matters. To ensure its legitimacy the European Commission and Parliament would not participate in its deliberations precisely because the French president was convinced that power should be preserved where it existed and installed where it does not, but never cancelled or undermined. He also believed that this framework should have its public support confirmed by means of a "solemn European referendum" (Mações, 2018).

The General ended up facing opposition to his second Plan from all the other EEC members. Even those who previously supported the first draft indicated that they could not subscribe to a Union along French lines. In February 1962 they circulated a counter-treaty, which comprised a common defence policy within the framework of the Atlantic Alliance. This was a major diplomatic defeat for France (Teasdale, 2016). De Gaulle decided to placate Germany and Italy by re-inserting references to NATO in the Plan. In March the document was verified by the Italian, Dutch, Belgian and Luxembourgish foreign ministers to include the military alliance in the treaty's preamble (Vanke, 2001). However, the Dutch and Belgian resolve to thwart France's ambitions was hardened after Heath made a speech which tacitly

upheld that supranationalism should be strengthened and that common policies would have to operate “shoulder to shoulder with the US” (Teasdale, 2016:45). So on 17th April, despite pressure from Adenauer to accept a compromise, the Dutch and Belgian foreign ministers postponed negotiations over the Plan until it was clear that the UK would enter the EEC. Discussions did not resume again afterwards (Ibid, 46-48).

De Gaulle explained this failure partially as a result of fears over France’s supremacy and partially because in the context of the Cold War everything else was secondary unless US protection was guaranteed. Although this justification seems biased, it is historically acceptable. It is also obvious that while Germany and Italy were less hostile to the Gaullist project, Belgium and the Netherlands gave the Plan its *coup de grace* since they wanted to counter French influence through Britain’s accession into the EEC (Mammarella & Carace, 1998). As Jeffrey W. Vanke (2001) outlined, the Dutch were against De Gaulle’s proposals from the start and neither side would find a middle ground. Revealingly, France’s leader admitted that in the place of the Netherlands he would have done the same, thus recognising “that French interests did not necessarily represent all European interests” (Ibid, 109).

Conclusion

De Gaulle certainly had a distinctive vision of a united Europe that was the opposite of what European federalists proposed. He dreamt of a French-dominated intergovernmental confederation that would be free from American influence and would eventually include the Soviet satellite states. Although he failed to implement this idea via the Fouchet Plan (particularly because of Dutch and Belgian opposition), his criticisms of supranationalism and his views on the importance of sovereignty, the genuineness of nation-states and the necessity for Europe to be an independent power are still valid and are being vindicated even today. Like it or not, De Gaulle initiated a trend of euroscepticism that is sweeping the continent and undermining the stability of the EU institutions. If these wish to survive it would perhaps be wise to take his theories into consideration.

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