



50 Years Ago:

The "Frexit" Fracas

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In these days, the continuing argument among the people of Europe over the British referendum to leave the EU coincides with the 50th anniversary of France's decision to exit NATO's command structure. As in today's case between the UK and European Union, resentment had been building up over an extended period of time. The biggest break probably occurred in 1958, when President Charles de Gaulle's suggestion to transfer the alliance's political and strategic decision-making to a tripartite directory consisting of the United States, Great Britain and (of course) France was declined. Afterward, in December of that year Paris rejected a joint air defense system for Western Europe recommended by NATO's military commission, withdrew the French Mediterranean Fleet on 11 March 1959 and the Atlantic Fleet on 1 January 1964 from NATO command, recalled all French officers from NATO naval staffs that same year and announced in late 1965 that France would not be taking part in the alliance's Fallex 1966 maneuver. Then, at a news conference on 21 February 1966, came the thunderclap: De Gaulle said France was withdrawing from the protectorat américain and would henceforth seek complete "sovereignty [...] on land and in the air," "with the requirement that henceforth all French 'elements' and all foreign 'elements' on French soil would be subjected to French 'authorities' exclusively." (As



per the West German embassy's report of the news conference; see also Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1966, p. 221.) Four days later the department head in the French Foreign Ministry, de Beaumarchais, explained the background to this decision to the German envoy Limbourg. "The French government says it considers [...] NATO obsolete in its present form. It has no illusions, however, that it might win over the other member states with its views. The French government says it knows that these states wish to uphold the principle of integration [...]. Therefore the French government believes it would be useless (inutile) to negotiate the matter with its NATO partners" (ibid, p. 218f.). In an aide-mémoire on 29 March 1966 de Gaulle further specified France's steps. Chief among these was that "effective 1 July the subjection to NATO of all French land and air forces" would end, a step that especially affected French troops in West Germany. Also, France would terminate its activities in the NATO headquarters (SHAPE, AFCENT, AFSOUTH, CENTAG). Those located in France would have to be transferred elsewhere. Moreover, US and Canadian forces stationed in France would have to leave the country by 1 April 1967 (ibid, p. 439). However, the French decision was both a thunderbolt and a balancing act, because France wished to maintain its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty, i.e. the political side of the alliance, and even declared its readiness to engage in bilateral talks on further cooperation, especially on the matter of mutual defense.

How did West Germany respond? For one thing, differently than Paris expected. Whereas France considered its right to station troops in the Federal Republic as per the treaty of 23 October 1954 unaffected, Bonn



regarded this very same "habitation treaty" as one element of a greater treaty structure that also included the London Final Act of 3 October 1954 and the Paris treaties of 23 October 1954, and came to the conclusion that: "If a partner retreats from individual commitments – and indeed fundamental ones – its rights are thereby likewise affected." A violation of the "commitment to place one's own forces under NATO command, [...] eliminates the basis for the right to station troops according to the treaty of 23 October 1954. The Federal Government must thereby take the view that the previous legal basis for the stationing of French troops in the Federal Republic of Germany ceases as of 1 July 1966" (ibid, p. 442). The West German Foreign Office also saw a political opportunity. "Since we can assume with relative certainty that the general wants to keep his troops in Germany, we can set conditions that serve our political, legal and military interests. We would be putting ourselves at a great disadvantage if we indicated an interest at any price in keeping French troops in place. Doing so would immediately throw into doubt the sincerity of the conditions we seek to negotiate in favor of our defense" (ibid, p. 445). These negotiations resulted in the exchange of two identical notes between West German Foreign Minister Willy Brandt and his French counterpart Maurice Couve de Murville on 21 December 1966, in which on the one hand West Germany expressed the wish "that French armed forces remain on the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany" and, on the other, France affirmed that, regardless of the conditions set by the habitation- and Germany treaty, "the exercise of the habitation right of the French armed forces on the territory of the Federal Republic of Germany, to the extent that they are affected, requires the consent of the government of the Federal Republic of



Germany” (see Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung vom 23. Dezember 1966, p. 1304). The director of the West German foreign office's political department, Meyer-Lindenburg, expressed satisfaction at the outcome of the talks. He said it had introduced an "improved legal situation" over the habitation treaty's "non-included criterion of German assent as a continuing basis for the presence of these troops": "In our ties with France this practically abolishes the permanence of the habitation treaty, which would fundamentally remain in effect until a peace treaty is achieved" (see AAPD 1966, p. 1445). The opportunity had been used.

The year 1966 of the Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland ("Files of the foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany" or AAPD) is [online and openly accessible](#).

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