

LETTER FROM PARIS BY JOCELYN COULON



From mid-April to mid-June, bitter cold, relentless rain and a dull grey twilight weighed heavily on all sectors of French society, including, of course, its institutions.

From the man in the street to the nation's political leaders, from strategists to the captains of industry, all gave vent to their ill humour in a consensus not often seen in France. Business leaders and politicians decided to launch a debate over the decline of France, based on nothing more than rumours. A few enlightened minds wisely ridiculed this new fad, denouncing its partisan nature. Since the turn of the century, however, the decline has been a very fashionable topic in this country, and as in many others, it is trotted out as a political platform when there is nothing left to say.

Strategists and military experts, comfortably ensconced in their policy of independent defence since Charles de Gaulle's arrival in 1958, watched the skies open when the two superpowers recently reached agreement on European security. They had, of course, expected this to some degree, as Moscow and Washington struggled over the past few years to revive the arms control process. And they suspected with good reason that the Americans were tired of spending astronomical sums on the defence of western Europe.

The bad news came last 14 April, when US Secretary of State George Shultz, leaving a meeting with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, announced to the allies that the two superpowers had agreed to eliminate not only medium-range missiles (Pershing II, cruise and SS-20) but also short-range (500 to 1,000 km) missiles. Washington gave NATO fifteen days to respond. Two months later, on 12 June, in Reykjavik, the same place where Reagan and Gorbachev had made these decisions, the Europeans gave their reluctant approval to the double-zero option.

Oddly enough, the French objected loudest, although there isn't a single US missile on French soil and despite the fact France is protected from any possible Soviet attack by its independent nuclear force. The West Germans could be expected to oppose the Soviet-US agreement, because it would make no cuts in very short-range (less than 500 km) missiles, which could strike only West Germany in the event of war. Yet only the French accused the Americans of betrayal and abandonment.

The French Minister of Defence, André Giraud, spoke of a "nuclear Munich," while some members of the press warned of a resurgence of defeatism and neutralism rem-

Germany and the Benelux countries would shift to a neutralist policy incompatible with western interests.

Second is the belief that the creation of nuclear "sanctuaries" on the territories of the superpowers and their programmes to build anti-missile defences would strike a deadly blow to the French deterrent force. What good would be France's nuclear missiles, acquired at such great expense, once the Soviets had completed an ABM system?

Finally, French leaders think the denuclearization of Europe would lead, in subsequent US-Soviet negotiations, to the inclusion of the French and British nuclear arsenals in possible reductions. France is fiercely opposed to any meddling with its nuclear strike force and suggests that the superpowers make significant cuts in their own strategic nuclear forces before attempting to lecture the

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iniscent of the 1930s. One of France's best known strategists, Pierre Lellouche, even argued that "the two superpowers had achieved mutual security at the expense of the Europeans," paving the way for dismemberment of the NATO alliance and the imminent withdrawal of American troops.

This general outcry against what the French termed the "suspicious dialogue between the United States and the Soviet Union," is dictated by three factors. First, Paris does not believe the elimination of nuclear arms in Europe would strengthen the continent's security. Quite the contrary: without the American guarantee, the Soviet Union would be in a position to exert enormous political and military pressure that might lead to war in Europe. Denmark, West

other nuclear powers. This proposal is so comprehensive it will never see the light of day, as the French know full well.

France's inflexible stand on the nuclear question arises from the unusual consensus among political leaders and the general public on defence issues. The major strategic principles developed by General de Gaulle in the 1960s survived socialist government rule from 1981 to 1986. De Gaulle succeeded in rallying to his cause part of the political right-wing and the general public when he decided to make France a nuclear power and withdraw from NATO. While supporting the latter measure, the left at first denounced the "bombinette," but changed its mind a few years later. Amazingly, the Communist Party supported the policy of nuclear deterrence in 1977 when

creating the "common front" with the socialists, thus cementing national unity on the strike force. In recent months, however, Communist Party leaders have had a change of heart and now don't know what they want.

Few countries can boast such a solid, stable consensus on military issues. Unlike the United States, Great Britain, West Germany and Japan, France is without a well-organized pacifist movement. It was almost untouched by anti-nuclear opposition in what for the rest of Europe was the debate of the decade. None of the major political parties currently advocates "labourist" unilateral disarmament or neutralist ideas like those of the West German social democrats.

This unusual position on the international chess-board has placed France in the enviable position of a world power on which NATO and especially the United States, can rely in times of crisis. The Americans were particularly grateful for Paris' intervention with Bonn during the euromissile crisis in 1983. President Mitterrand, with the solid backing of the public and other politicians, urged the Germans to accept deployment of missiles on German soil, repeating the slogan, "The pacifists are in the West, the missiles in the East."

France has its moods and quirks of character; some of which can prove quite bothersome. But the country is well aware of its pivotal place on the European map, as a solid ally of the US in the most difficult moments, with broad domestic support for its defence policy. France no longer seriously questions its own destiny, but instead that of Europe as a whole. It patiently seeks ways to preserve the continent's security, which has become an increasingly heavy burden on the United States. □

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