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The U.S. and U.K. Must Oppose French Plans to Weaken NATO

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The Obama Administration has announced it will back the full reintegration of France into the NATO command structure, with French officers reportedly in line to take two senior Alliance command positions: Allied Command Transformation (one of NATO's two supreme commands, based in Norfolk, Virginia) and Joint Command Lisbon (one of NATO's three main operations headquarters, which also commands the NATO Rapid Reaction Force).¹

This is a highly significant development that would put France at the heart of NATO military planning and reform proposals and represents an ill-thought-out and risky concession by Washington to the Sarkozy administration.

In a major speech at the Munich Security Conference on February 7,² Vice President Joe Biden welcomed France's decision "to fully participate in NATO structures" and also made it clear that the United States will "support the further strengthening of European defense, an increased role for the European Union in preserving peace and security, [and] a fundamentally stronger NATO-EU partnership." Biden's remarks echoed the views of British Defence Secretary John Hutton, who recklessly backed French plans for a European Union army last October.³

Both the United States and Great Britain must take a step back and launch a fundamental, wide-ranging review of the long-term implications of French demands for the future of NATO. The U.S. Congress should hold hearings to assess the new

Administration's strategy with regard to French reintegration in order to highlight any dangers posed to U.S. interests.

It would be a huge strategic error of judgment by the new U.S. Administration and the British government to continue supporting French ambitions for restructuring Europe's security architecture. Such acquiescence would hand Paris an extraordinary degree of power and influence within NATO—power and influence well out of proportion to France's actual military role in Alliance operations.

Providing France with such influence would also ultimately weaken the Anglo-American Special Relationship, shifting power away from Washington and London and toward continental Europe while paving the way for the development of a separate European Union defense identity—all of which will undermine NATO.

French Reintegration into NATO. When President Sarkozy first floated the idea of French reintegration into NATO's military command in June 2007, he outlined two preconditions: guaranteed senior command posts for French officers within the Alliance, and American endorsement of an increased EU defense identity (the latter of which he

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emphasized as the more important of the two).⁴ To formally establish the principle of reintegration, Sarkozy commissioned an influential “White Paper on Defense and National Security,” which was published in March 2008.

Designed to promote an independent European defense identity, the French White Paper on Defense and National Security clearly states:

The *European ambition* stands as a priority. Making the European Union a major player in crisis management and international security is one of the central tenets of our security policy. France wants Europe to be equipped with the corresponding military and civilian capability.⁵

The paper endorses several key principles:

- Redefinition of responsibility-sharing between America and Europe;
- An explicit rejection of the idea that the EU act as a civilian complement to NATO; and
- A strong preference for buying European defense technologies.

In June 2008, President Sarkozy circulated an additional document outlining Paris’s policy initiatives for European military integration. It presents the major elements of what an EU defense identity will entail, including:

- A permanent operation headquarters in Brussels;
- Common EU funding for military operations; and
- European exchange programs for military personnel.⁶

America Has Little to Gain—and a Lot to Lose.

It is likely that the Obama Administration will regard France’s reintegration into NATO as a diplomatic masterstroke. The Administration will claim that it has rebuilt the Franco-American relationship in a mutually beneficial way, and Sarkozy will in turn claim that it tangibly demonstrates France’s commitment to standing alongside America.

However, the Administration must ask itself what the U.S. actually gains from such a quid pro quo. Such reintegration may extract a few hundred additional French troops for eastern Afghanistan and generate stronger French public support for the Afghan mission. But President Obama will find that he has rescued the furniture only to give away the house. Not only is France already able to commit as many troops as it wishes to NATO missions (as it proved last year when 700 additional French troops were sent to Afghanistan), but 10 years of EU security initiatives have actually seen a decrease in European defense spending.

Washington continues to argue that supporting the European Security and Defense Policy is a means toward improving European defense spending and military capabilities. But after 10 years, such improvement has yet to occur and is not reflected in the projected defense budgets of any major European power. Since the EU and NATO operate in the same areas both militarily and geographically, the competition for resources will become fiercer, and Washington is likely to see its requests for military help increasingly rebuffed as France demands European commitments to EU missions.⁷ Once the

1. Ben Hall and James Blitz, “Command Accord Presages French Return to NATO,” *Financial Times*, February 5, 2009, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/fbc2122a-f323-11dd-abe6-0000779fd2ac.html> (February 9, 2009).
2. Vice President Joseph R. Biden, speech at the 45th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009, at http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?menu_2009=&menu_konferenzen=&sprache=en&id=2386 (February 10, 2009).
3. Isabel Oakeshott, “John Hutton Backs European Army”, *The Sunday Times*, October 26, 2008, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article5014832.ece> (February 10, 2009).
4. Agence France-Presse, “Debate Still Open on NATO Integration: French Defence Officials,” September 25, 2007.
5. French White Paper on Defence and National Security, June 2008, at http://www.ambafrance-ca.org/IMG/pdf/Livre_blanc_Press_kit_english_version.pdf (February 9, 2009). Emphasis in original.
6. Ian Taylor and Patrick Wintour, “European HQ Heads Sarkozy Plan for Greater Military Integration,” *The Guardian*, June 7, 2008, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jun/07/eu.france> (February 9, 2009).
7. French White Paper on Defence and National Security, p. 23.

United States gives its blessing to the creation of a separate European defense structure, it will have no grounds to compel Europe to choose NATO over EU requests in the future.

A Parisian Power Play. Rather than genuinely attempting to increase Europe's contribution to defense on the international stage, France is seeking to expand both Paris's and the EU's power base. Sarkozy's proposal is largely political, not military. In practice, France is already involved with almost all of NATO's structures and operations, including all political bodies and the NATO Response Force. It also partakes in joint training exercises.

French reintegration into NATO command structures offers little additional value to Washington but gives immense momentum to French ambitions for an autonomous EU foreign and defense policy. When French presidents talk about European foreign policy, they more often than not mean French foreign policy. Equally, when Sarkozy talks about increasing European security capabilities, he means decreasing American involvement in Europe.

For instance, in January 2007 the EU established a military operations center in Brussels, which later that year conducted "a nine-day exercise involving the virtual deployment of 2,000 European soldiers to deal with a crisis in the fictional country of Alisia."⁸ The operational center is without doubt a fledgling EU military headquarters that duplicates and will eventually compete with the NATO command.

The French proposal for an independent European defense structure will build upon the foundations laid by this new EU military headquarters. If the United States agrees to the French plan, it will represent yet another reversal of the Berlin Plus arrangements and a further erosion of the supremacy of NATO in Europe.

No Quid Pro Quo with France. If the Obama Administration agrees to support an independent EU defense structure as part of the French plan for rejoining NATO's command, such backing would

represent a major transformation in U.S. strategic thinking that would have a dramatic, negative impact on the future of the alliance. It would shift the political balance of power within NATO away from Washington and London toward the main centers of power within the European Union: Paris, Berlin, and Brussels. Far from encouraging European countries to spend more on defense, it would foster an even greater dependency culture within continental Europe upon NATO resources. Such a shift would also lead to a duplication of the NATO command structure without a doubling of manpower or materiel.

It is vital that both the U.S. and U.K. reject any French proposal predicated on American and British support for an independent European defense organization. Paris should be welcomed back into NATO's leadership club only on terms that are acceptable to all NATO members, and without the doling out of powerful command positions to a country that is at best a half-hearted member of the alliance.

Simply Unacceptable. It is difficult to see how a greater EU defense capability will actually strengthen the NATO mission or the broader transatlantic alliance. Indeed, encouraging a bigger military role for the EU can only make NATO's task more complicated.

NATO has been the most successful post-war multilateral organization precisely because it is a truly transatlantic defense and security alliance of independent nation-states with a single command. The French proposal to build up a separate EU defense structure—i.e., a competitor to NATO sucking up valuable NATO resources—is simply unacceptable and should be firmly rejected.

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8. Associated Press, "EU Says NATO Will Benefit from New European Military Center," *International Herald Tribune*, June 13, 2007, at <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2007/06/13/europe/EU-GEN-EU-Military.php> (February 9, 2009).