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Facing de Gaulle’s Challenge, 1963 to 1965

Introduction

On 14 January 1963, in perhaps his most infamous press conference, General de Gaulle delivered his double vetoes of John F. Kennedy’s Grand Design for an Atlantic Community and Britain’s first application for EEC membership. Linking the Americans and the British in an Anglo-Saxon challenge to Europe, he declined British entry to the EEC on the grounds that it would hasten a ‘colossal Atlantic Community under US direction and leadership’ which would ‘quickly absorb the European Communities’. Establishing political themes that he would pursue throughout the 1960s, de Gaulle made a blatant reference to NATO in declaring that ‘alliances do not have absolute virtues’ and described a Western Europe free of American influence which would play a role in bringing détente with the East.1 It was his purpose to realise these ambitions and in doing so, restore lost grandeur to France. On the same day, Kennedy gave his State of the Union address. Ignoring the General’s rejection of his Grand Design and the MLF, he told the American people of the nuclear agreement he had recently reached with the British prime minister at Nassau and how it would ‘assist the wider task of framing a common nuclear defense for the whole alliance’.2 In private, however, Kennedy was embittered by the French president’s actions and wrote a message of solace and solidarity to Harold Macmillan which was heavy in its anti-de Gaulle Anglo-Americanism:

You will know without my saying so that we are with you in feeling and in purpose in this time of de Gaulle’s effort to test the chances for his dream world. Neither of us must forget for a moment that
reality is what rules and the central reality is that he is wrong and Europe knows he is wrong. ... Moreover I count on you to let me know whenever you think we can strike a blow. And if this is an unmentionable special relationship, so much the better.\footnote{3}

Neither man would ever ‘strike a blow’. Before the year was out Macmillan had resigned the premiership due to ill health and Kennedy was dead. Indeed, it would be two years before an appropriate opportunity arose for the Americans and the British to prepare a counter-offensive. While London and Washington had drawn similar lessons from their shared experience in January 1963 and maintained a united interest in seeing de Gaulle’s challenge deterred, in the two arenas where combined intent might have worked towards that objective there were barriers to early action. With Britain’s EEC application defeated and the British dejected, there was no immediate possibility that a renewed application could become, as the first had been, ‘the single most important element in strengthening the Atlantic framework’.\footnote{4} Instead, the Americans focused their attention on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) Kennedy Round negotiations to reduce EEC trade discrimination against the US. In the politico-military field, the Kennedy administration placed greater emphasis on the MLF to promote Atlantic convergence but this nuclear blueprint was always explosive politically and the discord that it caused between London and Washington meant that it could not become a rearguard in which UK and US diplomatic forces were combined. De Gaulle had, it seemed, gained the advantage on 14 January 1963 and left the Americans reeling and the British overpowered. It would take the escalation of his challenge in 1965 to enable them to strike back.

This chapter explores these events and provides the essential background to the book’s central focus on 1966 and 1967. It begins by examining the response of the UK and the US to the vetoes of January 1963 and then considers how the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and the Conservative and Labour governments viewed the problem of de Gaulle from 1963 to 1965. The chapter goes on to explain how it was only when de Gaulle stepped up his challenge in dramatic fashion from mid-1965 – first, by pitching the EEC into crisis with a boycott of Community institutions for six months from June 1965 and second, by increasing his threats to NATO at his 9 September 1965 press conference – that the UK and US found sufficient common ground on which to resist him. Finally, the chapter puts this anti-de Gaulle diplomacy within the context of the wider Anglo-American rela-
tionship to give it its appropriate place in the ongoing development of US-UK relations in the 1960s.

**Fallout**

In a telephone conversation on 19 January 1963 Kennedy agreed with Macmillan’s view that de Gaulle had ‘gone crazy ... Absolutely crazy’ and suggested isolating the French president by making ‘him appear to be really taking us all back 20 years’. This objective was immediately rendered more difficult when, on 22 January, de Gaulle signed a Franco-German Treaty of Friendship with Konrad Adenauer, Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany. Ostensibly, the Germans had signalled their allegiance in the new struggle between de Gaulle, the Americans and the British though time would demonstrate that they were firmly Atlanticist. In the immediate aftermath in January 1963, however, the Franco-German treaty magnified the impact of de Gaulle’s press conference. The reactions in London varied from the exasperation of the Permanent Under-Secretary of the Foreign Office (FO), Sir Harold Caccia, (‘The Cross of Lorraine we can bear without too much burden, the double cross I find less tolerable’) to the depressed defeatism of Macmillan (‘All our policies at home and abroad are in ruins’). In Washington, an angry President Kennedy told the National Security Council that the United States ‘should look now at the possibility that de Gaulle had concluded that he would make a deal with the Russians, break up NATO and push the U.S. out of Europe’. Once tempers had cooled, however, a consensus emerged between the Americans and the British on how best to prevent France from causing further damage to their interests.

Clearly stunned by de Gaulle’s actions, the Kennedy administration asked itself whether its policies towards the Atlantic Alliance and Europe ought to be revised. After a period of introspection, it concluded that the fundamentals of Kennedy’s Grand Design remained apposite. There was nothing wrong with the objectives of Atlantic partnership and European unity, it was simply that de Gaulle stood in the way of them and that America’s allies would need to be convinced of Washington’s commitment to Europe. Kennedy was advised that while the Cuban missile crisis had ‘increased our stature’, it had additionally ‘increased the fear that by our own local action we might quite literally bring an end to Europe. These questions are spoken only by our opponent de Gaulle, but they are felt among our friends’. Short-run tactics were adapted post-veto to work around the French president as the
administration followed Arthur Schlesinger’s counsel: ‘recrimination does no good: de Gaulle is a natural force, and there is no point in reviling a tornado’. Washington would rise above the General’s assault, avoid a ‘public attack on de Gaulle or French policies’ and continue its support for the EEC without involving itself in its internal politics. This meant that the US would refrain from ‘strong expressions’ in favour of British EEC entry and instead adopt a ‘passive but watchful’ role. It would nevertheless seek ‘full Common Market commitment’ to the Kennedy Round negotiations. Otherwise, ‘the major instrument of United States policy’ was the MLF, the means of dealing with ‘the crucial nuclear question’ and linking European nations and the US. It alone was also ‘the most effective means of involving Germany in Atlantic programs’ which was vital as the Federal Republic was ‘the key to the continental European problem’.11

It was this point – the centrality of the MLF, especially in tying Germany to the Western alliance – that became a problem for Anglo-American relations. To begin with, the shared experience of being on the receiving end of de Gaulle’s diplomacy led to a renewal of close US-UK ties, a fact (as well as a hope) that Macmillan expressed to Kennedy the day after the press conference: ‘By a curious paradox de Gaulle’s attitude is cementing that very Anglo-Saxon alliance which he professes to dislike’.12 Yet cracks would show quite quickly. On 18 January, Walt W. Rostow, the Chairman of the State Department’s Policy Planning Council (PPC) who would go on to become National Security Adviser to President Johnson, reviewed the state of affairs with Michael Cary, the Acting Cabinet Secretary in the British government.13 While Cary raised the question of a possible link between the EEC and EFTA as a solution to Britain’s predicament, Rostow stressed that resolution of trade issues would ‘evoke the real problem which was whether politically we – who had fought two bloody wars over Germany – would abandon the Germans to DeGaulle [sic] politically’.14 Arguably the major issue emanating from de Gaulle’s 14 January declarations was the question of Germany’s loyalty to and status within the Atlantic Alliance. The British, no less than the Americans, felt keen concern on this score; after all, counter-balancing German power had been one of the political determinants of the 1961 EEC bid and London was fully cognisant of the danger that the Federal Republic might join with France in seeking independence in the Western alliance.15 Yet the equally pressing question for Britain after the failure of the Brussels negotiations was what to do about British trade and Britain’s place in Europe. And although London recognised Washington’s MLF logic in
terms of constraining de Gaulle’s ambitions, it did not help that Britain shared France’s view of the MLF while at the same time seeking to maintain strong US-UK relations as a key facet of its post-veto policies.

As Macmillan wrote in his diary on 4 February 1963, the ‘great question’ for Britain in light of de Gaulle’s veto was ‘“What is the alternative?” to the European Community’ and the answer he gave was ‘If we are honest, we must say that there is none’. EEC entry had become Britain’s major foreign policy initiative after 1960 to deal with the threat of the Community’s economic and potentially political might and to provide an independent power base for the British in their relations with the US. The first application was, quite simply, the way out of Britain’s unique predicament and de Gaulle had blocked it. In the circumstances, without any chance that France’s Five EEC partners or Washington would attempt to compel the French president to allow Britain in, London had no choice but to adopt a waiting policy. As the Foreign Office explained to the US embassy in London in early February 1963, the Macmillan government was in complete accord with the Kennedy administration ‘in seeking ways to further [the] common “grand design”’ and would pursue four objectives: to ‘maintain and develop cooperation in all fields with the “friendly Five”’; to ‘make [the] Kennedy Round [a] success’; to ‘promote [the] multilateral force in NATO’ and to ‘prevent any defection from EFTA’. In the post-veto environment, however, there was little progress to be made with the Five given de Gaulle’s intransigence although the Germans did manage to ensure quarterly UK-Six ministerial meetings in the Western European Union (WEU) on the grounds that they would not be used to renew Britain’s application. The British would seek to play their role in the Kennedy Round negotiations partly to ensure that the Commonwealth was not subject to trade discrimination by the EEC and also to achieve liberalisation of trade between the EEC and the rest of the world which would ease eventual British entry to the Community. In relation to both the EEC and the Kennedy Round, Britain would also seek to prevent any centrifugal forces in EFTA, the ‘half a loaf’ of 1959 which was now all that Britain had to live off. In Washington, however, for all Britain’s proposed activities towards the EEC, EFTA and the Kennedy Round, the real contribution which the British could make in the campaign to counter de Gaulle’s influence was to support the MLF, but that was something they would not do.

Time and again throughout 1963, Kennedy pressed Macmillan for a British commitment to the MLF. Ahead of his all important visit to
Europe in June 1963 where he would describe himself as a Berliner to vie with de Gaulle for German allegiance, the president asked again for a Cabinet decision in favour of the MLF as a ‘major step forward in our joint effort to bind the alliance safely and strongly together, in the face of General de Gaulle’s opposite course’. Privately, the Americans believed that the British failed to comprehend ‘the critical importance of [the MLF in] keeping the Germans on board if de Gaulle is not to win out’. While the Foreign Office saw political benefits in finding some way to respond to Kennedy’s request, largely in furthering the Anglo-American alliance, the Ministry of Defence was opposed on military grounds. Ultimately, Britain’s reluctance to sacrifice its independent nuclear deterrent to the MLF meant that Macmillan did not give Kennedy the answer he wanted when they met in June 1963 and that the issue then remained a running sore in Anglo-American relations which would fester into 1966. The one matter upon which Macmillan did want to collaborate wholeheartedly with Kennedy was their attempt to secure a Soviet signature on a Limited Test Ban Treaty which they accomplished on 5 August 1963. Yet even in this, their last achievement, Kennedy and Macmillan faced de Gaulle’s antipathy; he refused to sign the treaty amid what Kennedy described as ‘mounting evidence of the General’s unfriendliness’. There would be much more to come.

Troubled allies

At times it must have been hard for policy-makers in London and Washington to conceive of de Gaulle as any kind of ally at all. Leaving aside his European machinations, in January 1964 the French leader established diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, a decision that dismayed Washington given Beijing’s support for North Vietnam. Later, de Gaulle would attempt to undermine US policy in Vietnam still further by calling for American withdrawal and the possible neutralisation of South Vietnam. In March the General snubbed Johnson by not visiting Washington after a trip to Mexico and in April he delivered a speech denouncing ‘the two hegemonies’, the American and the Soviet, which were trying to divide and rule the world. That same month de Gaulle fixed his sights on NATO when French naval officers were withdrawn from inter-allied naval commands, extending France’s piecemeal abandonment of military integration which had begun with the removal of France’s Mediterranean fleet in 1959 and its Atlantic fleet in 1960. On 6 June 1964 de Gaulle slighted the 20th anniversary ceremonies of the Normandy landings and in July, the
Chief of the French General Staff, General Charles Ailleret, rejected the American-inspired NATO doctrine of Flexible Response. In November, responding to criticisms of his NATO policies by the new Chancellor of the Federal Republic, Ludwig Erhard, de Gaulle made a speech calling on Germany to join France in creating a European Europe. Actually, this was an empty gesture, the French president having already decided that Erhard’s government was essentially Atlanticist. In fact his speech was more important for its attack on the MLF, and for hints – which turned out to be expressions of firm intent – that France might yet leave NATO. Moreover, within the EEC, the restraint of France’s Five partners towards de Gaulle’s unilateralism which had seen the crisis of January 1963 surmounted had begun to weaken as the General’s attempt to control the Community’s development moved it towards another crisis.

This was the troubled diplomatic environment which confronted Lyndon Johnson as president from 22 November 1963. He later recalled his meeting with de Gaulle at John F. Kennedy’s funeral and remarked that in the face of the French leader’s constant criticism of his administration, ‘I made a rule for myself and for the U.S. government simply to ignore President de Gaulle’s attacks on our policies and the doubts he had raised about the value of our pledges’. Ignoring de Gaulle publicly masked the Johnson administration’s great preoccupation with the potential threat he posed to American conceptions of US-European relations. There were ‘two constraints’ on Johnson’s policies towards the Atlantic Alliance and Europe which endured throughout his presidency – the Cold War division of Europe and the obstacle of de Gaulle – and there is now an emerging view that he dealt with both effectively. Such a judgment confirms the opinion of his former Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, Francis Bator, that Johnson’s expertise as ‘a master of politics and of power’ in the domestic arena made him ‘shrewd and wise in coping with the cluster of overlapping, interconnected problems we faced in Europe’. This is not to say that he was ‘a foreign policy innovator’, rather an adept executor of the policies he adopted from Kennedy and a skilful director of those policies put to him by foreign policy experts in his own administration. Two themes did emerge in response to the two constraints that he faced. The first was his attachment to ‘bridge-building’ with the East, an ambition which he made the focus of a prominent speech on 23 May 1964 and which would go on to become central to his Atlantic-European policies after 1966. The second was restraint in the face of de Gaulle. Washington’s policies were ‘to avoid an open
confrontation over NATO powers and functions with the French’ as nothing could be gained ‘by exacerbating relations with France’ and ‘to support the idea of European unity and welcome progress which would strengthen trans-Atlantic ties’.

Johnson thus sustained the American formula for Atlantic partnership and European integration as the foundation of the Western alliance as his predecessors had done. In doing so, however, Johnson faced a severe policy problem which he believed to threaten his presidency within a year of taking office.

In the post-January 1963 review of US strategy, the two major instruments of policy that Washington pursued towards its unchanged objectives were the Kennedy Round and the MLF. The trade negotiations faced complications in 1964 but it was the MLF which presented the most acute difficulties. It became an issue of crisis proportions in October/November 1964 after de Gaulle had made France’s opposition to the plan absolutely clear, believing it to be an attempt by the US government to construct an axis with Germany and thus prevent a Western Europe free of American influence. France’s position, combined with continued British prevarication, endangered the Johnson administration’s principle aim of tying Germany to the Western alliance and protecting NATO in the face of the French challenge. As the Americans prepared themselves for Wilson’s first visit as prime minister to Washington on 7–8 December 1964, Johnson became fully engaged in the formulation of US policy in his inimitable style. Under pressure from the State Department and its luminaries, especially Acheson and Ball, to force Wilson to accept the MLF (they would continue with this line through to 1966), Johnson applied the logic of domestic politics that Bator has described as his strength. Noting the swelling opposition to the MLF at home and abroad, Johnson said that

I worked like hell to get to be President and I don’t want to set it off all at once. ... If we’re inciting the Russians, if we’ve set De Gaulle on fire ... if we’re forcing the British and not satisfying the Germans, and only getting 30 votes in the Senate – then the hell with it.

Not for the first time in their relationship as president and prime minister, Johnson would turn to Wilson to assist him in the dispatch of US foreign policy in Europe. On this occasion, what Wilson offered to the MLF impasse was what Johnson wanted, a way out.

In his first major foreign policy speech as prime minister, Wilson proclaimed that ‘We are a world power, and a world influence, or we are nothing’ and thus dedicated his government to maintaining
Britain’s global status.\textsuperscript{38} As committed as Macmillan had been to the Anglo-American relationship as a British foreign policy priority, it was problematic for Wilson that the Labour election manifesto had proposed the ‘re-negotiation of the Nassau agreement’ that the Conservative prime minister had signed with Kennedy to secure Polaris, the symbol of world power.\textsuperscript{39} It was yet more troublesome that Nassau obligated Britain to the MLF which Wilson had always found objectionable because of the access it would give Germany to nuclear weaponry and because it would be ‘provocative to [the] Soviets’, points which he would sustain during the nuclear sharing debate until its eventual resolution in 1966/67.\textsuperscript{40} During the election campaign, Wilson had managed to sidestep the Nassau renegotiation issue but retreating from the MLF required more than swift political footwork. What it entailed, in reality, was a full blown British alternative to the MLF, the Atlantic Nuclear Force (ANF). Although the ANF would have a mixed-manned element, its key difference from the MLF was that it included US and UK Polaris submarines which would remain under national control.\textsuperscript{41} It is generally accepted that the ANF was not simply a British ploy to sink the MLF before it was afloat but was an attempt to solve the MLF problem by satisfying the Americans and the Germans, and possibly including the French, while mollifying the Soviets with plans for nuclear non-proliferation.\textsuperscript{42} What it ensured in the short-term was that there was no Anglo-American crisis over the MLF at the December 1964 Washington meetings.

Had it not been for the ANF, the first Johnson-Wilson summit might have damaged the Anglo-American relationship at the beginning of the Labour government’s term in office. Instead, it yielded a productive encounter not least because the ANF transferred the responsibility for the ongoing MLF debate to Britain as the Johnson administration agreed that the Wilson government would discuss its proposal with the Germans and other Europeans.\textsuperscript{43} It also solved an internal problem for the president by giving him ‘effective command of a major issue of foreign policy’ and thus control over the MLF-oriented State Department, a tactical achievement which would pay dividends in the future when State officials would lobby once more for the MLF as the nuclear sharing issue continued to bother the Atlantic Alliance.\textsuperscript{44} The December meetings were also a success for Wilson who had gone to Washington to convince Johnson of Britain’s world responsibilities which comprised of its independent nuclear deterrent, its European role and its presence east of Suez. He also wanted to persuade the president that ‘by worldwide collaboration’ they would ‘preserve, unspoken, the
“special relationship”. Specialness was in the eye of the beholder and before the summit Johnson did not seem to see much of it when he ‘strongly expressed ... doubts’ to McGeorge Bundy, his Special Assistant for National Security Affairs, ‘about the value of having Harold Wilson’ in Washington. The value was that Wilson and Britain’s ANF deflected the heat of the MLF question and while it did not guarantee a solution, it promised to remove the president and the US from the firing line. American objectives had not been altered, but the difficulty of achieving them had been potentially eased with the relief palpable as Wilson was ‘astounded and jubilant’ at how the Americans had received his plan. However, for the Wilson government to benefit over the longer term from this initial boost to its policy of strong ties with Washington, it would have to convert the ANF into diplomatic profit.

Making real progress with the ANF was a problem for the Wilson government not least because the proposal had always in part been seen as ‘a time-buying exercise’ to enable Britain to circumvent American pressure to say yes to the MLF. The British did nevertheless try to gain international support for their new initiative in early 1965 but they faced intractable difficulties as the MLF had done. The Germans were critical of the ANF’s association with a non-proliferation agreement which they believed would discriminate against the non-nuclear powers and in January 1965 Erhard told Wilson that no decision could be taken until after the German elections in September. With Soviet opposition also clearly stated, and French resistance, this meant that the ANF went nowhere fast. Britain would remain committed to the ANF but Germany would continue to be dissatisfied and the US government would begin to divide between the steadfast supporters of the MLF and those, such as the Defense Secretary, Robert S. McNamara, who began to explore alternative outcomes in NATO based on a software solution to nuclear sharing involving multilateral consultation, rather than a hardware solution, such as the MLF/ANF, based on nuclear weaponry. But the fundamental problem persisted, adding all the while to de Gaulle’s growing criticisms of the Atlantic Alliance. And for Britain, the all too apparent lack of progress with the ANF exposed the continuing reduction of its influence in Atlantic-European affairs that had begun with de Gaulle’s vetoes in January 1963.

In spring 1964, the Foreign Office in London started to contemplate diplomatic action to counter the ill effects of de Gaulle on Britain’s foreign policies. Officials were spurred on by Britain’s Ambassador in
Paris, Sir Pierson Dixon, who reported throughout the year of de Gaulle’s hostility towards British and Western interests. On 12 March, for example, he warned that it ought to be ‘anticipated that France in the coming period will be found to be moving in the opposite direction to that which her Western Allies wish to take’ and recommended full cooperation between Britain, the United States and European allies to inhibit de Gaulle from blocking progress in NATO and the Kennedy Round trade negotiations. On 22 April, he urged London to inform France’s EEC partners and the Americans of French duplicity, especially in their policy towards the United States, a recommendation which by early summer became policy. The Foreign Secretary, R. A. Butler, warned the Cabinet on 12 May that ‘in dealing with President de Gaulle we have to weather a storm which should gradually subside after he disappears’ but in the meantime ‘we must prevent him having his way with the Western alliance while avoiding, if at all possible, a head-on clash with him’. The British government would not give the impression that it was ‘conducting a vendetta against de Gaulle or the French’ but there was no reason in the Foreign Office’s view to be ‘mealy-mouthed about saying what we think to our friends about French policy whenever we find it, or its manner, objectionable’ and UK ambassadors in the EEC capitals and Washington were instructed accordingly.

By spring 1965, one year on from Dixon’s attempts to invigorate British policy towards de Gaulle, the Atlantic Alliance and Europe, the head of the Foreign Office Planning Staff who would go on to become Wilson’s foreign policy private secretary in 1966, Michael Palliser, took up the task. In a bleak assessment which spoke of de Gaulle’s successful exploitation of the crisis in leadership of the Atlantic Alliance, Palliser warned of the immediate danger of Britain’s ‘growing irrelevance’ to American and European allies. His conclusions, as he admitted, were unoriginal and reminiscent of those reached in papers on British foreign policy since 1956: ‘unless [the British government] can soon evolve a more effective relationship with Western Europe and the United States within the Atlantic framework Britain will cease to be a world power’. The difference in 1965, however, was that this increasingly long-held conviction had been ‘obscured by our own economic difficulties and our commitments east of Suez’. In light of the strains on the British exchequer and on maintaining commitments globally, Palliser urged a ‘genuine reappraisal’ of ‘Britain’s role within Europe and the Atlantic Alliance’ which would be seen as such by the outside world. If the government embraced this idea, what Palliser believed to
be ‘the current reluctance of the United States to take the lead in Western affairs could give Britain the opportunity to reassert both her own importance in the Atlantic field and the sort of policies which are at present going by default and being undermined by General de Gaulle’. This did not mean that Britain could “lead” the Atlantic world’ (Palliser added that ‘Only the United States can do this’), it meant Britain indicating by its actions ‘the kind of Atlantic association the Americans will want to lead’. In essence, Palliser was urging ‘a more robust approach to de Gaulle’.54

Where Dixon had failed, Palliser succeeded. With the Foreign Office increasingly concerned about Britain’s ‘growing isolation from Europe’, the Foreign Secretary, Michael Stewart, agreed to submit a memorandum to the prime minister on 3 March 1965 which went to Cabinet later that month.55 Stewart made the case for an invigorated policy towards ‘the right sort of Europe’ within an Atlantic framework but Wilson’s own priorities did not chime with those of the FO. The prime minister’s commitment to the commercial revival of the Commonwealth and his instinctive caution towards the EEC – both made clear on coming to power in October 1964 – led him to reject a new European policy and instead continue with the policy of improving links between the EEC and EFTA.56 While the FO had recommended the building up of EFTA as part of a reinvigorated European policy, this course could not singly halt Britain’s isolation and de Gaulle’s progress. Moreover, the ANF had not provided the British government with any compensating diplomatic prestige. As such, Britain was increasingly marginalised and Wilson knew it because although he did not embrace a new policy towards the EEC in spring 1965, neither did he prevent the Foreign Office from active diplomacy in the Atlantic Alliance, especially alongside the US, when in the second half of 1965 de Gaulle’s challenge escalated.

Preparing to confront de Gaulle

In his State of the Union address on 4 January 1965, Johnson upheld the Atlantic Community as his country’s continuing objective, avowing to pursue the ‘goal of twenty years – a Europe growing in strength, unity, and cooperation with America’.57 This was the same goal that de Gaulle had denounced on 14 January 1963 and while his resistance to it had continued in 1964, there was an ominous acceleration in his rhetoric and actions during 1965 which Dean Acheson put down to the General’s acceptance of his own mortality: ‘As de Gaulle was not likely to have nine
lives, which were given only to cats and Konrad Adenauer, he would see his last period of absolute power coming'. On 4 February 1965, de Gaulle used another of his press conferences to signal the intensification of his challenge to American dominance in the West. He called for the reform of the international monetary system and an end to the gold exchange standard which, in his view, privileged the Americans and the British as the dollar and the pound were the world’s major reserve currencies. This was the beginning of a campaign to undermine Washington’s monetary supremacy which would continue throughout the 1960s and cause the Johnson administration frequent concern. So too would de Gaulle’s consistent criticism of American involvement in Vietnam and his attempts to foster Franco-Soviet relations, evidence of which in February and April 1965, alongside his growing detachment from NATO, suggested that his ultimate objective was to break the Cold War alliance system. Disquiet at such a prospect escalated from May 1965 when the Americans and the British received warnings from government sources in France that the French president was arranging a radical adjustment in his country’s relationship with NATO in 1966.

In May 1965 the US embassy in Paris reported increasing signs that de Gaulle planned to withdraw France from military integration in NATO, expel US men and materials from French soil and ‘substitute a looser, classical defense arrangement for NATO after 1969’. On 14 May Rusk and Stewart discussed the possibility that ‘an urgent problem might arise with President de Gaulle’ as the Americans suspected that he may ‘as a political demonstration … ask the United States Government in the near future to remove certain unimportant facilities from France’. Shortly afterwards, the British Secretary of State for Defence, Denis Healey, was informed by his French counterpart, Pierre Messmer, that after the French elections in December and probably sometime in early spring 1966, France would ‘propose [the] abolition of NATO’. Healey immediately conveyed this information to Washington and suggested Anglo-American contingency planning, an idea which the Foreign Office in London also recommended. These early indications of de Gaulle’s ambition were remarkably accurate as in spring 1966, he would indeed withdraw France from NATO’s integrated military command structures, evict NATO (including US) facilities and personnel from France and propel the Atlantic Alliance into crisis. Given the French president’s penchant for smoke and mirrors, however, there was no guarantee that the intelligence gained in May 1965 portended actual French policy. That said, it was enough to lead both the American and British governments to review their policies towards the Atlantic Alliance,
Europe and de Gaulle’s France, especially after July 1965 when the French president brought crisis to the EEC.

On 1 July 1965, France began the empty chair crisis, a six month boycott of Community institutions which threw the EEC into a period of intense uncertainty as the French confronted their partners over critical questions concerning the Community’s future. This stand-off between Paris, which feared losses for France due to the European Commission’s proposals for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and the Five, led by Germany, who had decided to contest de Gaulle’s dominance in the Community, especially in light of his wider diplomatic actions in the West, threatened to bring European integration to a halt. In retrospect, as one authority has put it, the empty chair crisis was ‘a careful confrontation’ which saw both sides work towards compromise and the continuation of the EEC. Yet at the time, especially to onlookers such as the Americans and the British, de Gaulle’s EEC hostilities provided more evidence of his divisiveness. The crisis came just as government agencies across Washington completed a report on Europe and US policy initiated by the White House in May after the news of de Gaulle’s NATO intentions became known. It reflected growing frustration in the Johnson administration:

The stature and capacity of General de Gaulle cannot be allowed to blind us to the divisive nature of his views and their baneful effects on our own interests. De Gaulle is not indulging in petty tactics but is dedicated to the national ambitions of a single state. The ultimate purpose of the present French Government is to establish the position of France as clearly superior to its European neighbours and freed of all commitments that limit France’s ability to maneuver as De Gaulle wishes...

Despite its exasperation, the US government had no means to intervene in the EEC crisis; in fact, its policy from January 1963 had been to maintain its support for European unity but not involve itself in EEC affairs, concentrating instead on the Kennedy Round negotiations which, due to de Gaulle’s EEC diplomacy, would be stalled until 1966. Nevertheless, this did not lead the Americans to a policy of inaction. Prior to the outbreak of the EEC crisis, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had already concluded that

The ingredients for a confrontation of the Five with De Gaulle over the future shape of Europe are already present in the debate on EEC
agricultural and financial regulations. This cannot, of course, be
influenced directly by the US, but in a real political sense, these prob-
lems are closely related to the coming confrontation with France in
the Atlantic alliance. In the absence of some accommodation between
France and the other NATO members on defense arrangements, it is
difficult to see how European unity can proceed much beyond the eco-
nomic sphere where it has achieved such notable success. Nor does it
seem very likely that the question of Britain's role in an economically
united Europe can be settled unless there is also some settlement of its
defense role – and that of the US.  

As 1965 progressed, Washington judged that de Gaulle's EEC and
NATO policies and aims were linked and had to be faced in the same
time period and that a solution would involve settling what became
known as the France-NATO problem and encouraging the British
towards a new European policy.  

From June 1965, the Americans began a process of collaboration
with the British which would endure after de Gaulle's anticipated
move against NATO became a reality in March 1966. On 3 June, Rusk
suggested to Britain's Ambassador in Washington, Patrick Dean, that
the US and UK governments hold preliminary discussions ‘on a dis-
creet basis’ about how to deal with the question of France and NATO
before the American position became firm.  

This coincided with
British interest in such information exchange; the day before Rusk sug-
gested US-UK talks, the British embassy in Paris gave its American
opposite number details of a review produced in the Foreign Office in
London which concluded that the ‘proper course ... is to plan ahead
for an “orderly confrontation”’ with de Gaulle after the December elec-
tions, the moment when his move against NATO was expected, ‘to
carry the “5” along with the UK and the US ... to preserve the essence
of the Alliance’.  

It was this strategy which the Americans and the
British discussed in Washington on 15/16 June. The talks ‘disclosed
broad agreement’ between the two on de Gaulle's intentions and on
the need to use the rest of the year to prepare steps in response. They
also revealed two points of difference. The British emphasised that
their policy towards the upcoming crisis was to do nothing to incite
de Gaulle, who ‘was not immortal’, because there ‘was nothing to gain
by bringing matters to a boil’.  

This was not a view that the State
Department shared and it would attempt to put a more robust line into
US policy. The meetings also revealed that the Americans did not want
to be seen working openly with the British. Private planning was
acceptable, but public alliance would feed de Gaulle’s suspicion about an Anglo-Saxon conglomerate at the heart of NATO and insert an unwelcome imbalance into the nascent tripartite US-UK-FRG relationship that the Johnson administration was keen to nurture in the resolution of the France-NATO problem.71

As Rusk initiated ‘discreet’ discussions with the British on policy towards France and NATO, he was also aware of German anxieties about American policy towards Europe. In a discussion with Dean Acheson on 3 June, the German Foreign Minister, Gerhard Schröder, agreed with the suggestion that early preparations ahead of action by de Gaulle were necessary and stressed that what was ‘missing in Europe’ was ‘a clear concept of the stand of the US on these matters’. In terms which must have brought a chill to Washington, Schröder added that there ‘was a mixture of resignation and hopelessness [in Europe]. De Gaulle’s ideas offered no healthy substitute … The US should throw its full weight into the scales, despite its commitments in other parts of the world’.72 Amid the atmosphere of uncertainty largely created by de Gaulle but, as exemplified by Schröder’s final comment, also influenced by American involvement in Vietnam, the Johnson administration was very sensitive to any signs of dissatisfaction in Bonn, not least because of the unsolved nuclear sharing question. As the State Department and other Washington agencies developed US policy towards France, NATO and Europe in the second half of 1965, they began to see the possibility of positive outcomes to a crisis initiated by de Gaulle. One was the creation of a new Anglo-American-German relationship at the heart of the Alliance. In July the State Department argued that in meeting the French challenge, the ‘existing special relationship with the UK and a deepening and separate special [US] bilateral relationship with Germany’ could be surpassed as ‘these three great members of the West can work more intimately together and with Italy and other European nations for the common good’. As part of the process, the primary US goal of incorporating ‘Germany in the evolving European and Western framework’ would be achieved, thus preventing a Cold War horror: ‘Finding an equal and adequate place for Germany in the Western structure is of crucial importance if a frustrated Germany is not to turn East in its search for an end to its partition’.73 From the Policy Planning Council, Rostow argued the same point. For him, ‘the most promising point of attack [was] the UK’: ‘If the UK, U.S., and Germany can come together in constructive ventures … they may be able to overcome current divisive concerns’. Failing that, ‘…the revived nationalism we have feared since 1945
may ... threaten European and Atlantic cohesion sooner than we thought’. The spectre that Rostow conjured up was the prospect that an unsettled German government would follow one of two courses both equally disagreeable to American objectives: a strengthened and widened Franco-German rapprochement or an independent approach to the Soviets, with both intended to settle the questions which perturbed the Germans above all, a European security arrangement and reunification with the East.74

The new US-UK-FRG relationship was also seen as a way to solve problems related to Britain. In the State Department’s ambitious opinion, talks between the three powers either late in 1965 or in 1966 could be used to obtain German agreement in principle to participate in long-term financial support for the pound (which was suffering chronic weakness) and to settle the issue of British military expenditure in Germany, a vexed question which involved almost habitual complaints from British governments about short-falls in the support payments made by Bonn to London to cover the foreign exchange costs of British forces stationed in Germany.75 Furthermore, the tripartite talks would be used to create an Anglo-American-German position on the France-NATO problem and in doing so, work towards a solution to the ongoing MLF/ANF deadlock.76 As the State Department formulated these plans, it also briefed Johnson on the probability of an assault by de Gaulle on NATO and the president thus agreed to the suggestion that Ball should deliver a message from him whilst in Paris as ‘a shot across the bow’.77 At his meeting with de Gaulle on 31 August, Ball reaffirmed his country’s fundamental belief in NATO’s form and purpose only to listen to the French president criticise NATO’s suitability in the modern era and reject military integration. De Gaulle also questioned the under secretary’s defence of NATO nuclear sharing by reminding him of the German invasions France had suffered (‘France could not forget the past’) and that German involvement in nuclear defence ‘would certainly ruin any possible contacts with Soviet Russia or Eastern Europe’.78 Nine days after his meeting with Ball, de Gaulle gave the clearest indication to date that the warnings of an impending French move against NATO were, in fact, genuine.

On 9 September 1965, the French president used his second bi-annual press conference of the year to expound in unprecedented terms his long-held criticisms of NATO by stating that ‘by 1969 at the latest, the subordination called “integration” that NATO entails and which puts our destiny under foreign authority, will cease as far as we are concerned’.79 This statement, although hazy on the specific timing
of action, was nevertheless full of portent for the Atlantic Alliance. Just over a week later, Washington received confirmation from a respected high level source in the Quai d’Orsay that de Gaulle intended to denounce the North Atlantic Treaty in 1968 with effect in 1969 and that he would act in 1966 to extract France from NATO’s military command and to expel NATO from France. Moreover, the French would not take part in the Special Committee created by McNamara in NATO to explore consultative solutions to nuclear sharing, a prediction which proved accurate in November 1965 when France did indeed refuse membership. De Gaulle’s September press conference compounded State Department frustration as Washington’s policy in preparation for the France-NATO crisis reached maturity. A meeting on 8 October comprising the Departments of Defense and State, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the White House national security advisers saw Bundy stamp Johnson’s authority on the tactics for dealing with de Gaulle. The president was ‘determined that France should not be allowed to push the US around, but he will want to play the large cards with France himself; particularly he will want to control what is said to the French and when’. This quelling of a more incendiary State Department approach ensured that the US would not give de Gaulle the confrontation he wanted over NATO, but instead await his initiative and leave the responsibility for the crisis on his shoulders. Sustaining the strategy adopted since January 1963 of not ‘reviling a tornado’, Johnson controlled the State Department as he would do again in steering NATO through its 1966 crisis. The president, who already had a real war of far greater proportions to fight in Southeast Asia, did not want another of the diplomatic kind in Europe. He thus met de Gaulle’s increasing unfriendliness with friendliness. When the new French ambassador to Washington, Charles Lucet, presented his credentials at the White House on 15 December 1965, Johnson said he was convinced that de Gaulle was not anti-American and ‘was sure that “when the chips were down” France would be with us as, indeed, had been the case in the past’. As US policy developed during 1965, the France-NATO problem, tripartite US-UK-FRG relations, and the nuclear sharing question tended to converge. This nexus was the subject of talks between Rusk and Stewart on 11 October. The British foreign secretary proposed that in the absence of certainty about de Gaulle’s plans, the UK and US should compare studies on France and NATO and then confer with the Germans and other allies. Reflecting as it did the tactical approach evolving in Washington, Stewart’s suggestion found agreement with
Rusk noting that American and British views were ‘close together’. Views were not so close together, however, on the specific issue of nuclear sharing with both sides simply restating their positions. Rusk reiterated the State Department line that ‘at a minimum collective arrangements must leave open the possible inclusion of [nuclear] hardware’ and, in reply, Stewart reaffirmed that Britain still supported the ANF. The only common ground was that between Rusk’s recommendation for Anglo-American-German talks and Stewart’s statement on ‘the desirability of placing the UK and Germany on a basis of equality within NATO’. The foreign secretary’s words were formulated for their American audience but they also reflected British acceptance of the need to work with the Germans. Indeed, improved Anglo-German relations were one important component of the policy evolving in London over 1965 which sought to counter the effects of de Gaulle’s policies on Britain’s conception of Atlantic and European relations and its place in the world.

It was the Foreign Office which attempted to push the British government towards a more active policy in response to de Gaulle in 1965. This was, as we have seen, an endeavour which began with the Paris Embassy’s repeated accounts of de Gaulle’s plans and prejudices against the Americans and the British from 1964 but it was the escalation of the French president’s challenge during the following year which galvanised matters in London. While the EEC’s empty chair crisis had been seen as one of the elements of the rising French challenge, it did not lead immediately to a reappraisal of Britain’s post-January 1963 policy of postponing the question of EEC membership while seeking closer EEC-EFTA relations. That policy had been embraced by the Labour government which had no enthusiasm for a renewed EEC application, not least because its prime minister ‘was not a natural European’. Thus London met the Community’s travails with official remorse, wished it well, and decided neither to intervene nor seek profit from the divisions among the Six. When the empty chair crisis was matched by growing evidence of de Gaulle’s intentions towards the Atlantic Alliance and NATO in the summer of 1965, however, the FO began to reconsider its view of Britain’s European policies.

As seen above, Stewart had attempted to urge Wilson towards ‘the right sort of Europe’, one set within an Atlantic framework, in March 1965 and while the prime minister had agreed to a Foreign Office Cabinet paper on these lines, policy remained unchanged. Wilson’s scepticism had led him to wonder ‘what is the right sort of Europe? Unless it was genuinely outward looking and not autarkic it must be
inimical to Atlantic and Commonwealth links’. As an Atlanticist whose government was committed to the revival of Commonwealth trade, Wilson saw no reason in spring 1965 to reconsider EEC policies. Nevertheless, Stewart and the FO continued to urge the government to recognise that Britain’s influence in the Atlantic Alliance and Europe and thus in United States was being jeopardised by exclusion from the EEC, difficulties over nuclear sharing in NATO and de Gaulle’s disruption to the stability of both institutions. Stewart attempted to bring the potentialities to the Cabinet’s attention again in August 1965 in a memorandum on policy towards Germany. The fear of ever-decreasing British power and impending crisis in the Atlantic Alliance ran throughout its paragraphs. Unless Anglo-American-German cooperation in NATO was promoted to settle the problem of nuclear sharing and resist de Gaulle, Britain’s relationship with the US could be weakened by new special American-German relations. Close ties with Germany over the EEC was the only way that Britain could help shape Western Europe’s future along lines acceptable to the UK, and given Bonn’s authority in Washington and NATO, any British initiative towards détente would need German support. Moreover, Britain’s economic weakness and German economic strength made the friendship of Germany vital. These points were significant in and of themselves, but in combination they were formidable and were made all the more so by Stewart’s closing point that ‘General de Gaulle’s nationalistic policies are striking an echo throughout Europe with inevitable consequences in Germany’. Once again, however, the prime minister was not inclined towards a policy involving a new emphasis on the EEC.

Now committed to reviving Britain’s EEC policies, the FO continued to confront the prime minister’s resistance. In the closing months of 1965, the question of Britain’s relations with the EEC became ‘a pressing issue’ for the first time since January 1963. Public debate in the UK and conjecture that one of the possible outcomes of the EEC’s empty chair crisis would be a sustained French boycott and pressure for Britain ‘to take the French seat’ largely accounted for this. Indeed there were those in the Foreign Office who would see France’s departure from the EEC as an opportunity for Britain. However, given that London’s governing policy towards de Gaulle was to do nothing precipitate, especially in relation to the imminent crisis in NATO, Britain did not seek to profit from the disruption caused by France. Stewart nevertheless used de Gaulle’s activities to lobby Wilson yet again. On 10 December 1965 he made his most strident case so far by arguing that the EEC crisis rendered a policy of ‘inaction … dangerous’. Stewart
predicted that matters in the Community would be settled on French terms to Britain’s disadvantage and thus called for a new policy. His recommendation was that the government issue a declaration of readiness to negotiate for EEC entry which would be mainly designed to thwart the French ‘by stiffening the Five and offering an alternative option to Europe’. Britain would finally take a stand against de Gaulle.

Wilson was not convinced that a declaration of intent to join the EEC was in Britain’s interests. He blocked the circulation of Stewart’s paper on the grounds that it held within it ‘a lot’ that he found ‘hard to swallow’. In truth, the PM shared many of de Gaulle’s objections to the Community: ‘Why should we find the acceptance of French conditions “dangerous” since they reject supranationality, play down the Commission and oppose majority voting? These ought to help us and also minimise the dangers of an exclusively European foreign policy and ultimately a European deterrent.’ He also questioned whether it was in Britain’s economic interest to be inside the Community. As we shall see, Wilson’s EEC inertia would stand in marked contrast to his approach to de Gaulle’s threat to NATO when it finally manifested itself in spring 1966. If Wilson was instinctively close to the French leader on the Community, he was at odds with him on NATO. Prior to visiting de Gaulle in April 1965, the prime minister was adamant that ‘if de Gaulle wanted us to join his anti-American front, he would be wasting his time. We weren’t going to play on that’.

There were those in the US government who, like Stewart and the FO, saw a connection between the EEC and NATO and a British role in both to prevent de Gaulle’s predominance. John C. Tuthill, the US Ambassador to the European Communities and one of the State Department’s Europeanists, believed that France’s diplomacy in the Community could ‘only be viewed in the context of de Gaulle’s related objectives – in NATO and elsewhere’ and described an ‘almost unanimous recognition’ in Europe ‘that the EEC and NATO crises are not only interrelated but simply different aspects of the same crisis’. De Gaulle’s aim was ‘to break France out from [the] “yoke” of [the] whole system of European and Atlantic cooperation built up since World War II’. To tackle this sedition, the US could do little more than reaffirm its established policies but if ‘Britain were to make it plain that it was prepared to “enter Europe” the Five would be greatly encouraged to stand up to de Gaulle and his view of Europe’. Consequently, Tuthill recommended that it should be US policy ‘to encourage Wilson and the Labor Government to be prepared to take this position … some time in early 1966’.
The opportunity for the US government to act upon Tuthill’s advice presented itself during Wilson’s visit to Washington on 16/18 December 1965 but it did not take it. The president was briefed by the State Department on matters related to Britain, France, the EEC and NATO in preparation for Wilson’s arrival. State’s hardline towards de Gaulle’s expected actions in NATO expressed itself in Ball’s comment that while the American and British positions were close on the general problem, ‘we may find the British more willing to temporise than we would wish or than would be prudent’ when the crisis began.98 This prediction proved inaccurate as the British would be enthusiastic defenders of NATO; conversely, the judgement of the Labour government’s EEC policy was more accurate. Rusk informed the president that the question of British membership was now an issue of debate with pro-European sentiment rising in Britain although Wilson’s position remained ‘ambiguous’.99 Wilson’s disinclination to accept his foreign secretary’s advice on the EEC and the fact that he had greater priorities to discuss with Johnson, priorities which the president shared, ensured that the EEC and NATO were not subjects of any prominence during the December meetings. Germany and the ANF were briefly discussed but the agendas were dominated by the Rhodesian problem, Britain’s defence review, its commitment to remain east of Suez, and Britain’s continuing support for American policy in Vietnam.100 To a president and an administration whose foreign policy priority was a war in Southeast Asia, having political backing from a British Labour government and a British military presence in the region of conflict were the principal issues in the Anglo-American relationship, especially at the top. Wilson’s assurances in both areas ensured that the December meetings went off well; even the question of the MLF/ANF did not cause argument despite the fact that little or no progress had been made in the year since Wilson had brought Britain’s new initiative to Washington.101

That Atlantic and European matters were not of such significance, or such mutual interest, as to warrant discussion between the president and the prime minister in December 1965 did not mean, however, that they were not pressing issues for the American and British governments or that they would not, in time, become prominent in the Johnson-Wilson relationship. Indeed, as the two leaders met in Washington, their administrations were ready to respond to de Gaulle in a manner that they had not been since his press conference of January 1963. During 1964 and 1965 they had watched and waited as de Gaulle condemned US predominance, marginalised Britain, dis-
rupted the EEC, threatened NATO and attempted to secure a European voice in East-West détente, unsettling the Germans on all points. His challenge could no longer be dealt with by inaction and thus the Johnson administration and the Wilson government had prepared, separately and in conjunction, to meet it. What they waited for was the chance to begin the strike back and it came in spring 1966, as predicted, when de Gaulle brought crisis to NATO.
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