

Charles de Gaulle and the Nuclear Revolution

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CHARLES de GAULLE was among those post-war leaders whose views about the utility of military force changed with the advent of atomic weapons. De Gaulle concluded that nuclear weapons would tend to produce caution—as well as collusion—among nervous nuclear powers; that the bomb would dissuade an aggressive state from threatening a nuclear-capable state; that the existence of two nuclear superpowers exacerbated the fissiparous tendencies of a bipolar world; and, not least important, that France itself could derive manifold benefits from possessing the bomb. A case-study of de Gaulle's thinking about nuclear weapons, then, helps support the hypothesis that nuclear weapons have indeed changed the character of international relations, and that they have thereby had great significance in the post-war world.

I. The Impact of the Bomb on International Relations

Gaullist Thinking and the Nuclear World

In order to understand how nuclear weapons may have changed de Gaulle's thinking about the uses of military force, we must first briefly recall what his thinking was. And it should be made clear from the start that Charles de Gaulle—much more than the average middle-ranking French officer of the interwar period—already had well-developed conceptions of history, diplomacy, and statecraft by the time he was confronted with the nuclear age. The son of a history teacher, de Gaulle read voraciously as a boy and young man—Jacques Bainville, Henri Bergson, Friederich Nietzsche, Maurice Barrès—and was steeped in conservative French historical and philosophical traditions. He was chosen for his sense of history and leadership to lecture at the Ecole de Guerre in the 1920s, and in the following decade wrote several books on war,

politics, and international relations. De Gaulle was far from a narrow-minded soldier trained to execute but not reflect.

De Gaulle's early world-view was one later scholars would have described as a brand of 'realism': nation-states were the pillars on which the international system was built; those nation-states could form temporary alliances but ultimately could not trust one another; power was the basis of international politics; states were ambitious but often cloaked their ambitions in ideology; morals had little place in international affairs; the world was inevitably hostile and involved human and national competition. It goes without saying that for de Gaulle—a soldier since his teens, a tank commander, and an army general—military force was a viable tool of statecraft. Countries had vital national interests to protect in a dangerous and anarchic international system, and it was often necessary—and sometimes even noble—to bear arms to protect them. Indeed, for de Gaulle, military genius and national achievement went together: 'no statesman had ever attained glory without having been gilded with the lustre of national defence.'¹

It is important to note that de Gaulle's vision of nations, competition, and armed struggle came not merely from reading Machiavelli or Hobbes, but rather from his own personal experience. By the time he was 24, in 1914, de Gaulle had watched the blatant competition of European states for power, the emergence of two rigid alliance systems, and the outbreak of World War I. During the interwar period, he saw how Anglo-Saxon 'guarantees' had been worthless—not only to France in the 1936 Rhineland affair but later to Czechoslovakia at Munich—and he watched the Germans build the power that would eventually crush the isolated France. When war did come in 1939, de Gaulle was not surprised to see that the Americans would wait two years before joining the fight for democracy in Europe—and this only after the United States itself was attacked by Japan. France would have to stand up for itself in war and in peace, and it could count on no one but itself for survival. De Gaulle's own early experiences simply confirmed what his intellectual bias had already led him to believe: that nations act according to their interests, and that this was never more true than during time of war.

By the time the nuclear age dawned in 1945, then, Charles de Gaulle already had a very particular set of beliefs about nation-states, military force, and international relations. How did the invention and deployment of nuclear weapons alter this set of beliefs? Did the existence of the bomb influence de Gaulle's foreign policy? Was France ever deterred by another country's nuclear weapons, and did France ever deter anyone else? Such questions are difficult to 'test', for two reasons. First, the France of the Gaullist years had no overriding claims that might have brought it into military conflict with one of the nuclear powers. To be sure, France took exception to Soviet behaviour in Eastern Europe and the Third World, vociferously opposed the exercise of American 'hegemony', and clashed with the United Kingdom over the Common Market. But none of these issues was ever great enough to lead to potential military actions by France. Second, de Gaulle was never in a position

to use, or to threaten to use, nuclear weapons. During the years of colonial conflicts in Indo-China, Algeria, and Suez (when French nuclear threats might have been conceivable), France had no deliverable atomic bombs, and by the time it became an operational nuclear power—in 1964 with the delivery of the first Mirage IV bombers—all those conflicts were over. France's nuclear deterrent throughout the 1960s was an 'existential' one, and France's existence, happily, was never in question. Thus, unlike in the cases of Truman, Eisenhower, Stalin, or Khrushchev, we have no direct evidence that might help us determine how de Gaulle would (or would not) have used nuclear arms or threats, or how his own actions might have been deterred by the nuclear threats of others.

This does not mean, however, that we have no way of assessing the atomic bomb's impact on de Gaulle. Instead, it means that in order to understand this impact we must look not only at the particular French experience with nuclear weapons (explored in part 2 of this essay) but also at how de Gaulle expected other nuclear powers—the United States and the Soviet Union—to behave. And here we have a wealth of rhetoric, action, policy, and analysis that dates back to the very beginning of the nuclear age.

The 'Immense Consequences' of Hiroshima

Charles de Gaulle first learned of the existence of the 'apocalyptic work' that would produce nuclear weapons during a visit to Ottawa, Canada on 11 July 1944. Excluded by the 'Anglo-Saxons' from any information regarding the top secret Manhattan Project, the French leader only became aware of that effort when three French scientists—Pierre Auger, Bertrand Goldschmidt, and Jules Guéron (who were working on plutonium with the Canadians at the time)—took it upon themselves to 'inform the General of the importance of the project'. The Frenchmen wanted de Gaulle to be aware of 'the considerable advantage that possession of the new weapon would represent for the United States'.² The General 'understood very well' what his compatriots were suggesting and, following their advice, got in touch with France's leading physicist, Frédéric Joliot-Curie, after returning to Paris.³ Obviously, however, occupied France was in no position to do much of anything in this great matter, and with the liberation of Paris set to take place within a month it is safe to presume that the leader of the Free French had other things on his mind.

The real message that got through to de Gaulle about nuclear arms, of course, took place not in Canada in 1944 but in Japan in 1945, and his first public comment about the nuclear era came on 11 August, two days after the Nagasaki bomb.⁴ In a speech primarily focused on France's own efforts of national renewal, de Gaulle noted that 'the frightful explosion of atomic bombs suddenly demonstrates the immense forces that can be unleashed onto the world, either for destruction, or for the good of humanity . . .'.⁵ The observation, if perfectly accurate, is relatively unoriginal and very much like other comments of the time, except perhaps in one respect: already, de Gaulle was

suggesting that the forces released by these weapons might not only be used for 'destruction', but also for 'good'. It would be interesting to know whether by this de Gaulle was referring to their capacity to end a tragic war sooner—as they had just done—or to the prospect that the bomb might be so destructive, so 'frightful', that it would deter aggression in the first place. Because de Gaulle makes a clear distinction between using the bomb for 'destruction' and using it 'for the good of humanity', the hypothesis that de Gaulle was an early believer in nuclear deterrence cannot be excluded. There is, however, little other evidence to support this view.

Several months after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, de Gaulle had more to say about the 'immense consequences' of the atomic bomb. In a press conference on 12 October 1945 he commented:

In the end this bomb was built by our allies, and it is true that as a government, as France, we had nothing to do with it. What can I say, a number of things have been handled without our being present. These were not always the best handled of things. As for the atomic bomb, we have time. I am not convinced that atomic bombs will have to be used in this world in the near future. In any event, the French government is fully aware of this question which is very grave for the entire world and whose consequences are obviously immense. This bomb shortened the war. For the time being we must recognize this merit. We must now see to it that it does not become a global cataclysm.⁶

Several observations emerge from a close reading of this short text. First, it should not be surprising that Charles de Gaulle, a patriot who had spent the past five years battling both enemies and allies on a single-minded mission to prevent the disappearance of his country, should discuss the atomic bomb first in terms of France's own role. That the Anglo-Saxons pursued this grand enterprise without France (though not without the help of French scientists!), and that they would continue to refuse to share their knowledge and responsibility with de Gaulle, was perfectly consistent with the General's wartime (and pre-war) experience. The leader of the Provisional French Government had been frozen out of Yalta and Potsdam, and he was not surprised to be likewise excluded from this latest great event.⁷

Second, de Gaulle seems to have recognized not only the immense but also the paradoxical consequences of the new weapon. The nuclear question was both 'very grave' and at the same time the bomb was worthy of 'merit'. Nuclear weapons were capable of shortening—and perhaps deterring—a long, bloody war, but at the same time they could cause unprecedented destruction. It was the same point de Gaulle had referred to in his remarks about 'the good of humanity' on 11 August.

Finally, and more important where we are concerned, is de Gaulle's comment, 'As for the bomb, we have time.' While far from an outright assertion that France, too, would be heading down the path to atomic power—an absurd suggestion given the circumstances of late 1945—this was an obvious reflection for Charles de Gaulle to make; the man who had written about the French army in terms of cycles going back to the Merovingians was in no hurry, but he was already thinking of France's own place along this new

frontier of military affairs. For the memorialist who would also later write that 'France is not really herself unless she is in the front rank', it went without saying that if other countries would have these extraordinary weapons, so, eventually, would France.⁸

Indeed, just a few days after this press conference, de Gaulle made a decision that would later prove to have been a key step in the creation of France's own *force de frappe*: on 18 October 1945 he founded the Commissariat à l'Énergie Atomique (CEA). This new body, to be sure, was designed to study atomic energy for civilian use, and no specific plans whatever were made to work on a bomb: it would be wrong to call the founding of the CEA an unambiguous decision to produce atomic weapons.⁹ Still, given de Gaulle's preoccupation with 'rank', his initial conclusions about the bomb's importance and his tendency to think about the long-term ('as for the bomb, we have time'), it seems certain that the door to nuclear weapons was meant to be left open. Indeed, the CEA's unique statute not only specifically mentioned 'national defence' as one of its areas of competence, but also gave it complete administrative and financial autonomy to free it from bureaucratic interference.¹⁰ In addition, archives reveal that a 27 October letter written by Raoul Dautry, the CEA's main administrator, refers to 'the atomic bomb', but that 'bomb' is scratched out and replaced by 'energy'.¹¹ It is likely that already when he founded the CEA in 1945, an eventual military role for French nuclear energy was not far from de Gaulle's mind.¹²

What can we conclude about de Gaulle and the bomb from this early evidence? Did the General believe from the very beginning that military force would lose some of its former utility, and that international relations would forever be changed? It would not be surprising, of course, if de Gaulle—the strategist who had made his name in the first place by presciently analysing the impact of new weapons—did indeed understand a great deal about the nuclear revolution from the start. The General was certainly enough of an intellectual to comprehend the dialectic of fear that would come to replace the dialectic of force, and he was certainly flexible and pragmatic enough to accept that the old ways of warfare he had learned might irrevocably be changed. As a national leader—and as a Catholic—he was also certainly sensitive to the power that moral force and public opinion could have on a leader's willingness to wreak such biblical destruction. In short, de Gaulle had all of the personal characteristics—foresight, flexibility, intellect, and sensitivity—to be capable of understanding the potential impact of the nuclear revolution sooner and more fully than most.

But the evidence we have from 1945 is not enough to make such a case definitively. Clearly, de Gaulle recognized right away that the bomb would have 'immense consequences', and he—who had so fiercely criticized the French military's tendency to 'fight the last war'—was certainly not, this time, going to be caught doing the same thing.¹³ At no time did de Gaulle—unlike a number of other military leaders of his time—think of the bomb as 'just another weapon'.¹⁴ But as prescient and sensitive as de Gaulle was in 1945,

there is no compelling evidence that he was immediately prepared to revise his views about military force and international relations. Indeed, if we follow de Gaulle's 'nuclear learning process' into the next two decades, we are able to see that he continued for a time to believe in the continuation of past patterns of great-power conflict, war, and behaviour before finally coming to the conclusion that the development of the bomb would significantly change those patterns. De Gaulle was a precocious nuclear student in 1945, but he still had more to 'learn'.¹⁵

Reaching Conclusions about the Bomb

If the de Gaulle of 1945 was not yet convinced that nuclear weapons had changed the world, when does he come to such a conclusion? When and why does he fully come to believe—as he asserted in 1964—that the bomb 'has opened a completely new phase in the history of our universe'?¹⁶ A look at Gaullist thinking from the 1940s into the 1950s and 1960s shows how de Gaulle's views of the nuclear revolution developed with time, technology, and nuclear proliferation to the point where he had become one of the world's most convinced believers in the power of the atomic bomb.

From 1945 to 1949, of course, the United States had a nuclear monopoly, and could threaten to use nuclear weapons without having to worry about a nuclear response. Logic would suggest that, under these circumstances, the United States was in a position to deter whatever it wished. If, for example, the Soviet Union were to threaten to invade Western Europe as Germany had several years before, the United States would be in a position to stop this invasion with much greater ease than the last time: the spectre of Hiroshima was still strong, and it should have been enough to keep the Red Army in place.

Yet de Gaulle, during these years, was consistently pessimistic about war in Europe. As the leader of the anti-communist *Rassemblement pour la France* (RPF) that he founded in 1947, the General regularly warned against the possibility—one might even say the *likelihood*—of a coming war.¹⁷ The menacing Soviet bloc of 'almost 400 million men' had already imposed its 'totalitarian dictatorship' on two-thirds of Europe, and now stood poised only 'two stages of the Tour de France' away from France.¹⁸ 'Of course,' he told Claude Mauriac later that year, 'we will be going to war'.¹⁹ By the time of the Soviet coup in Czechoslovakia and blockade of Berlin in 1948, and particularly after the June 1950 launching of war in Korea—which de Gaulle saw as a mere prelude of what was to come in Europe—the General's pessimism had become acute: 'The tempest is approaching . . .' he warned in August 1950. 'The Korean war is the preliminary sign. The whole world knows that one day or another the aggression could be unfurled on Europe and on France.'²⁰ Three months later, de Gaulle told Georges Pompidou that 'war is encroaching and will not stop . . . France will not recover in time [and] will be invaded, bombarded. [Her leaders will be] hung, because the communists are tough, and the people will have suffered.'²¹ Thus, de Gaulle's statements of these years—both public and

private—hardly suggest the reassurance of someone convinced that nuclear weapons were ‘frightful’ enough to deter the use of military force.²²

Why, though, did the man who later argued that his own country could deter the Soviets with a small nuclear force expect war when in this case the Americans still had a monopoly on the bomb? Why did France have to ‘renovate its forces’ and ‘prepare to act as an Atlantic bridgehead’?²³ How could deterrence possibly fail under these circumstances? Does this not suggest that de Gaulle—at least during the late 1940s—believed nuclear weapons to be something close to ‘irrelevant’? The first possible response, of course, is that de Gaulle did believe in nuclear deterrence, but that he was never convinced that the Americans—even with their nuclear monopoly—could be trusted to come to Europe’s defence. No one could be certain that the very limited number of fission bombs held by the United States would be enough to ensure military victory in Europe over the huge Red Army, and no one could be sure that the United States would be prepared to find out. Having only recently demobilized under popular demand, it was not clear that the Americans would come back to Europe even with their atomic bombs, nor was it evident that they would be willing to use them if they did come back. In this view, de Gaulle might have already believed that atomic weapons could deter, but not if deterrence depended on one country using them in the defence of another.

Such a hypothesis can surely not be excluded, and indeed it fits well with later Gaullist perspectives on international relations in the nuclear world. But another—and more persuasive—hypothesis suggests that de Gaulle was in fact not yet a firm believer in nuclear deterrence of any kind, and that he was not yet convinced that the bomb was ‘unusable’. While he knew that nuclear devastation would be horrible and potentially ‘cataclysmic’, de Gaulle also knew that atomic bombs had in fact been used only several years before, and that nothing could with certainty prevent them from being used again. The Soviet Union, after all, was many times larger than Japan, and its leaders might not be so fearful of the new (and few) American weapons. Practically *all* of Japan had been within easy striking range of US atomic-capable bombers; Moscow, on the other hand, was hundreds of well-protected kilometres away from American bases. With the Americans controlling only a small fraction of the destructive power they would later possess, and with uncertain means of accurate delivery, de Gaulle still believed that nuclear weapons might easily fail to deter war, and that if deterrence did fail, atomic weapons would be used. At the start of the Korean war de Gaulle told Georges Pompidou that ‘there will be atomic bombings, the Americans too are brutes . . .’²⁴

In any event—whether he failed to believe only in *extended* nuclear deterrence or in any nuclear deterrence at all—what does seem clear is that the de Gaulle of 1945–54 was not yet persuaded that the simple *existence* of nuclear weapons would be enough to deter war and aggression. This was a far cry from the de Gaulle of the 1960s, the apostle of ‘existential deterrence’ who was confident that the nuclear superpowers would go to great lengths to avoid war with each other. Whether because the early atomic bombs were not yet

destructive enough to scare national leaders, because the limited means of delivery then available might convince the Russians they were not really vulnerable, or because US invulnerability to a Soviet nuclear response might encourage the Americans to use atomic bombs to defend Europe, de Gaulle was still in the early 1950s not yet a believer in 'deterrence by nuclear danger'.²⁵ He feared both a conventional war in which nuclear weapons would have failed to deter and a nuclear war in which they would actually be used.

This view was not to last. It is difficult to say precisely when de Gaulle came to the opinion that the potential for nuclear war would itself be enough to deter aggression against a nuclear power, but sometime during the mid-1950s seems to be a reasonable guess. After 1954, de Gaulle's repeated public warnings about war in Europe cease; by 1956 his confidence even in the concept of a 'minimal' French deterrent becomes clear; after 1957 his arguments that the United States would not risk nuclear war for Europe intensify; and by 1959 de Gaulle appears fully confident that the Soviets do not want war in Europe. There are obviously factors other than the nuclear one that explain some of these changes, but de Gaulle's own comments and policies, as well as the timing of the changes, seem to suggest that nuclear weapons also played a major role. By the time de Gaulle came back to power in 1958 he was convinced that the very existence of nuclear weapons in the hands of one country would be enough to make others think twice before confronting it.

That the mid- to late 1950s should be the period in which de Gaulle decisively reaches this conclusion corresponds well with developments taking place at that time. From the beginning to the end of the 1950s the destructiveness and deliverability of nuclear weapons increased manifold: Thermonuclear fusion bombs (hundreds of times more powerful than the Hiroshima device) were invented and were now held by the Soviets as well as the United States; long-range bombers had multiplied and improved; and by the end of the 1950s ballistic missiles suddenly made possible the destruction of every country in the world. Moreover, the American experience of nuclear 'non-use' in Berlin, Korea, Indo-China and the Taiwan Strait had demonstrated that US policy-makers were well aware of the nature of the new weapons and were consequently awed by the idea of their use. If leaders were so afraid of the result of nuclear use even when they would be the 'users', it could reasonably be concluded that they would be even more intimidated by bombs that might be used against them. For de Gaulle, all of this seems to have led to the belief that the old ways of armed confrontation among the great powers had passed.²⁶

For evidence of this belief, we can look in a number of different places. First, for example, is the startling contrast between de Gaulle's great concern about war in Europe during the late 1940s, and his apparent confidence that there would *not* be war a decade later, despite crises as serious as those in Berlin in 1958–61 or Cuba in 1962. As is often pointed out, the otherwise rebellious de Gaulle was always one of the staunchest defenders of Western positions when crises broke out between East and West. In the second Berlin crisis, for

example, de Gaulle consistently warned Konrad Adenauer about an Anglo-Saxon 'sellout', and despite the local Soviet preponderance of force, refused to concede anything to Moscow.²⁷ One reason for de Gaulle's self-assurance, a March 1959 letter written to Eisenhower reveals, was that de Gaulle had 'the impression that the Soviets don't want to turn this into war'.²⁸ For de Gaulle, it would not only have been 'odious' but 'absurd' for the Soviets to try to intimidate the West, given 'the risks run by our species . . . [with] everything arranged so that means of destruction capable of annihilating continents could be unleashed in the space of a few seconds'.²⁹ Similarly, during the Cuban missile crisis, de Gaulle was solidly behind the firm American response to the Soviet deployment of IRBMs in Cuba, despite the potential retaliation US action might provoke and the fact that the Cuban missiles posed no threat whatever to France. As de Gaulle told President Kennedy's special emissary to Paris, Dean Acheson, 'If there is a war, I will be with you. But there will be no war.'³⁰

As the 1960s proceeded, de Gaulle's confidence that the superpowers would earnestly seek to avoid conflict increased, and by the middle of the decade he was travelling to Moscow and arguing that the conditions for détente had emerged. That de Gaulle in 1966 was thumbing his nose at NATO—which he had strongly supported in 1949—and courting the Soviet Union is a powerful suggestion that he was no longer concerned about war in Europe; it is hardly reminiscent of his warnings of a Third World War in 1948. By the mid-1960s, de Gaulle was clearly convinced that the Russians '[would] not dare'.³¹

As already noted, there are plenty of reasons for this change in attitude that had nothing to do with nuclear weapons. By the end of the 1950s, Stalin was dead, NATO was in place, the Western European democracies were no longer so susceptible to communism, and China was in the process of leaving the Socialist bloc: the balance of power in Europe seemed to be shifting away from the Russians. But it is also clear that a major factor—perhaps the decisive factor—in de Gaulle's new faith in peace came from the realization that the superpowers would not risk confrontation in a world of mutual assured destruction. 'More than anything,' de Gaulle later wrote, 'the general situation has changed' because 'it would be folly for Moscow—as for anyone else—to set off a global conflict that could end up, after the dropping of bombs, in general destruction. And, if one does not make war, one must sooner or later make peace.'³² This analysis (written in 1969) was not, moreover, a mere retrospective judgement, but one that de Gaulle asserted clearly as the situation developed in 1959: 'A few signs of détente are starting to become clear,' de Gaulle said, because 'Russia . . . accepts that a conflict, no matter which side started it, would lead to general annihilation.'³³ The Soviet Union was still a 'totalitarian Empire that muzzled fourteen nations and openly envisaged doing the same to all the others', but none the less, there would be no war in Europe.³⁴

A second persuasive piece of evidence that de Gaulle believed by the late 1950s, that nuclear weapons could have a great effect on the way statesmen would act, has to do with his views about the not yet existent French nuclear

force. Throughout his years in 'exile', of course, de Gaulle formally had nothing to do with the Fourth Republic's nuclear programme, which only directly began to undertake military research in 1952. De Gaulle, however, was surely interested in the nuclear question and was eminently well connected at the CEA, many of whose top administrators and scientists were Gaullists.³⁵ It was during these years that de Gaulle apparently came to the conclusion that even a 'minimal' deterrent force could have very powerful effects.

In an April 1956 meeting with a French general (Pierre Gallois) sent by NATO to inform de Gaulle about nuclear strategy, de Gaulle showed he was already rather well informed, and first used a formula that revealed his confidence in the concept of proportional nuclear deterrence. 'Yes,' de Gaulle said in plain language after Gallois' long personal seminar on the emerging theories and jargon of deterrence, 'all France has to be capable of is tearing off the arm of an aggressor . . .'³⁶ De Gaulle, it seems, already by this time had great faith in the process of nuclear deterrence, at least for the country that possessed the deterrent.

It is important to understand why in de Gaulle's mind the bomb would have such an effect because this explains why he believed the superpowers would shy away from conflict. Nuclear weapons would induce caution and restraint in national foreign policies simply because no country could risk the immense destruction they would wreak. There were only two prerequisites for deterrence—means and will—and de Gaulle believed both were available in sufficient quantities, even for a country the size of France. As he put it in 1964:

We are in a position to think that six years from now our deterrent means will reach a total instantaneous power of 2,000 Hiroshima bombs . . . The field of deterrence is thus henceforth open to us. For to attack France would be equivalent, for whomever it might be, to undergoing frightful destruction itself. Doubtless the megatons that we could launch would not equal in number those that Americans and Russians are able to unleash. But, once reaching a certain nuclear capability, and with regard to one's own direct defence, the proportion of respective means has no absolute value. Indeed, since a man and a people can die only once, the deterrent exists provided that one has the means to wound the possible aggressor mortally, that one is very determined to do it and that the aggressor is convinced of it.³⁷

In other words, de Gaulle believed that world leaders would indeed be influenced in the way they used military force. Even a small atomic force would 'have the sombre and terrible capability of destroying in a few seconds millions and millions of men. This fact cannot fail to have at least some bearing on the intents of any possible aggressor.'³⁸ It is difficult to make the point any more clearly than that.

Finally, de Gaulle's conviction that nuclear weapons had changed the nature of international relations is strongly suggested by the fact that he was willing to devote as much as 50 per cent of France's military-equipment budget on nuclear forces while French conventional forces were starved of modern weapons.³⁹ He was convinced that a credible strategic nuclear deterrent would keep the Soviets from threatening the West, and that such a deterrent

would only be credible if the Europeans themselves had some say over it. Nuclear weapons were the modern equivalents of the tanks and aeroplanes that revolutionized warfare after World War I, and it was necessary to recognize and adapt to this fact. The bomb, de Gaulle argued to France's top military officers in early 1968, was a 'fundamentally new weapon [that] required a reorganization of military thought and a redefinition of power . . . without comparison to what we have known before.'⁴⁰

By the end of the 1960s, then, de Gaulle was clearly convinced that the bomb would have profound effects on how statesmen would use military force. He was uninterested in the elaborate and arcane theories of the so-called 'wizards of Armageddon', and simply considered that rational states—the entities that made up his world—would not initiate conflict if by doing so they put their very survival at stake. For him, nuclear weapons 'held the destiny of every people and every individual in suspense'.⁴¹ Any war with such weapons would be 'a disaster for everyone, because . . . after the conflict, there might be neither powers, nor laws, nor cities, nor cultures, nor cradles, nor tombs'.⁴² The spectre of such an outcome was enough to change the way leaders would use or threaten to use military force.

The Effect of the Bomb on International Relations

We have concentrated so far on the point that the nuclear revolution changed the way de Gaulle thought about the utility of military force, but the bomb had an effect on other aspects of Gaullist thinking. This is most notably the case in terms of Gaullist perspectives on international structures and relations between states. While it can probably not be said that the bomb actually *changed* Gaullist conceptions of the international system, it is clear that it significantly reinforced those conceptions. The point is important because it suggests another way in which nuclear weapons may have been 'relevant' in the post-war world and it confirms that de Gaulle thought they would be seen as such.

The 'nuclear reinforcement' of the Gaullist world-view took place in two main ways. First, the existence of nuclear weapons bolstered de Gaulle's view that the nation-state was the only legitimate international actor and the only conceivable foundation for national defence. Because states in the nuclear era had the capacity to annihilate one another, no state would be willing to take a nuclear risk for another one, since its very survival would be at stake.

States, de Gaulle had always believed, could never fully trust one another, and now, in a nuclear world, the idea that they could do so was patently absurd. It was one thing, perhaps, to risk an expeditionary professional army, as countries had done in the past. The Americans, for example—if late and grudgingly—had intervened in World Wars I and II on behalf of Britain and France when US interests seemed at stake. But could they have done so had Germany in either period been able to threaten the United States' very existence? The answer seemed to de Gaulle self-evidently negative. As he put it in 1963:

Above and beyond everything, the deterrent is now a fact for the Russians as for the Americans, which means that in the case of a general atomic war, there would inevitably be frightful and perhaps fatal destruction on both sides. In these conditions, no one in the world—particularly no one in America—can say if, where, how, and to what extent the American nuclear weapons would be employed to defend Europe.⁴³

Consequently, the nation-state was more fundamental than ever because it was the only actor that could ever be counted on to take responsibility for matters as important as nuclear war. Just as France and Europe could not count on the United States to risk annihilation for it, no European state could count on another. The European Community, then, was ultimately not viable as a supranational federation that would deal with defence. In such a federation, who could possibly be responsible for a decision as momentous as that of pushing—or even threatening to push—the nuclear button? Such an act, de Gaulle believed, could never come from anything but the nation-state.

The second major 'reinforcing' effect of nuclear weapons on de Gaulle's view of international relations was that they tended to divide an emerging bipolar world even more sharply between the two hostile blocs. The post-war world, de Gaulle doubtless acknowledged, would have been split between East and West whether fission had been discovered or not; the ideological competition (or at least the struggle for power) between the United States and the Soviet Union was not the result of the bomb. But the bomb did reinforce this bipolar structure by forcing almost every state in the world to align with one of the nuclear powers for its ultimate protection. Nuclear weapons also strengthened the alliance leader's insistence that decision-making be centralized and at the same time made that leader suspicious of smaller allies who might drag it into a nuclear war. The whole situation, de Gaulle believed, only reinforced the subordination of non-nuclear countries to one or the other major nuclear countries:

those non-nuclear countries that are threatened by one of the two giants are led to accept a strategic *and thereby political* dependence *vis-à-vis* the other giant, because this is the only way they believe they have any hope for security.⁴⁴

This mechanism might best be illustrated with an analogy to civil society, the sort of which John Foster Dulles was fond. The nuclear world might be compared in de Gaulle's mind to a dangerous city, divided between numerous rival gangs.⁴⁵ For years, all the gangs have approximately similar kinds of weapons: handguns, slingshots, and the like. Suddenly, the two largest gangs come to possess new, much more powerful weapons—say, hand grenades—while the others do not. What does this new development do to the relations between all the rest of the gangs?

Clearly (in de Gaulle's mind), it forces them to ally, or rather, to subordinate themselves, to one of the gangs with the new capability to destroy all of the others. In the old situation, varying combinations of smaller gangs could offset the strength of the larger, and even single groups with enough intelligence and pluck could stand up for themselves. Now, with ultimate security only

available from one of the two gangs with the new weapons, polarization is inevitable, much to the detriment of all but the two largest gangs.

Without getting into the implications for 'gang policy' (come up with your own grenades), the point of the story is simple: for de Gaulle, the division of the world between those that could destroy and those that could not was a pernicious one. It would lead either to a polarization in which all non-nuclear countries had to align with one or the other of the nuclear countries, or, under different circumstances, to collusion between the nuclear countries, in which case the non-nuclear ones would be subordinates all the same. In de Gaulle's own words:

The world situation in which two super-states would alone have the weapons capable of annihilating every other country . . . over the long run could only paralyse and sterilize the rest of the world by placing it either under the blow of crushing competition, or under the yoke of a double hegemony that would be agreed upon between the two rivals. . . . Under these conditions, how could Europe unite, Latin American emerge, Africa follow its own path, China find its place, and the United Nations become an effective reality?⁴⁶

Nuclear bipolarity was thus even more divisive than the previous version; it forced all non-nuclear states to line up in their respective blocs, and prevented the legitimate emergence of other independent actors.

It seems, then, that in the mind of Charles de Gaulle nuclear weapons strengthened the most basic features of the international system.⁴⁷ They reinforced the fundamental role of the nation-state and froze the world into a bipolar order. In and of itself, of course, the fact that de Gaulle came to such conclusions does not tell us that he was right; indeed, other thinkers thought the post-war world was leading to the *end* of the nation-state (because defence was only possible via alliances), and most believed the world would have been a bipolar one anyway. What this conclusion does tell us, however, is that de Gaulle, at least, believed nuclear weapons and nuclear threats would indeed have an impact on the way states and statesmen would act. If nuclear weapons were 'irrelevant' in practice—and would be seen as such by national leaders—there would be no reason to conclude that they would have such an impact. For all the reasons we have seen, atomic bombs could not, and would not, be ignored.

II. France's Own Bomb

Whenever de Gaulle may have concluded that nuclear weapons would 'revolutionize' international relations, it is clear that he never wavered in his view that France should have its own bomb. Indeed, the determination with which the French nuclear programme was pursued under de Gaulle is itself testimony to the fact that the General, at least, did not believe nuclear weapons to be 'irrelevant'. Why, though, was French possession of nuclear weapons so

important to de Gaulle? What did he believe he could do with them? In practice, has the French bomb played a role in the post-war world? While a long discussion of the French nuclear force is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, there is no better testing ground for the conclusions reached above than de Gaulle's own actions as president of France. And a look at those actions reveals that de Gaulle's decisions as a nuclear leader were highly consistent with those conclusions: France had to have the bomb, because for a number of different reasons, the bomb 'mattered'.

The Logic of the French Nuclear Force

At least six different justifications of the French bomb can be identified: status; influence; independence; national security; technological gains; and strong domestic leadership.⁴⁸ While all were used at different times and to varying degrees, the first four are those that have most to do with the international system and thus concern us here.⁴⁹ It should be kept in mind, of course, that all these justifications were often used—and even exaggerated—in order to rally public or international support. But it should also be clear that they cannot *all* be dismissed as self-serving: The existence of the *force de frappe* itself is proof enough that for *some* reason, the French believed it was worth it.

Many knowledgeable observers would argue that the primary justification of the French bomb was not national security but national status. De Gaulle could not accept that France—which 'could not be France without grandeur'—would be excluded from a private club of two or three. Nuclear weapons were symbols of technological achievement and military prowess in the modern world, and it was inconceivable for France not to possess them. Minutes after the first French atomic test in 1960—before French leaders could ever imagine defending or deterring, France was already, in de Gaulle's mind, 'stronger and prouder'.⁵⁰ The next day, de Gaulle proudly claimed in a letter to his son Philippe that 'Our bomb is going to change the ideas of a lot of people. It is a success, especially as proof of our capacity to assimilate the most arduous and most complicated techniques.'⁵¹ What was most important was that France could count itself among *les Grands*.

Geoffrey de Courcel, de Gaulle's former secretary-general, has stated that 'for [de Gaulle] what mattered was to be able to say that France was politically a nuclear power, and to talk as equal to equal with the Anglo-Saxon powers.'⁵² General Albert Buchalet, former director of military applications at the CEA, has agreed:

From my meetings with General de Gaulle on this subject, I was left with the impression that he considered, during this period, the success of the nuclear explosion more than anything to be a political means permitting him to sit at the *table des Grands*. Naturally, as a military leader, he measured fully the revolution that atomic weapons brought to the military domain.⁵³

In a world of nuclear 'haves' and 'have-nots', it was critical for France—if it was to 'remain France' in de Gaulle's words—to be in the former category and to get out of the latter.⁵⁴

A by-product of nuclear status, in the Gaullist view, was influence throughout the world. This was the case not only in terms of encouraging superpower disarmament, one of the early justifications of the *force de frappe*, but also in terms of political influence. 'When we become an atomic power,' de Gaulle said in November 1961, 'we will have all the more means to make our actions be heard in the domains which are dear and useful to all men: those of world security and disarmament.'⁵⁵ After the Reggane test de Gaulle issued a communiqué stating that 'the French Republic is better able to make its action felt for the conclusion of agreements between atomic powers with a view toward realizing nuclear disarmament.'⁵⁶

Indeed, the bomb would help endow France with the world-wide political responsibilities de Gaulle sought:

our country, becoming for its part and by its own means a nuclear power, is led to assume for itself the very extensive political and strategic responsibilities that this capability brings with it, responsibilities whose nature and dimensions evidently make them inalienable.⁵⁷

By earning France the respect of its allies, and by giving Paris a say in when to start or how to fight a nuclear war, the *force de frappe* would allow France to play the sort of leading role in the Atlantic Alliance that it felt it deserved. As de Gaulle wrote to his top advisers in a private 1961 note: 'the American attitude will change only once we have acquired atomic bombs.'⁵⁸

An autonomous French nuclear force was also the key to the political independence so critical to de Gaulle. As seen earlier, the General believed that in a world with just two nuclear powers, all other states would be obliged to accept the leadership, and ultimately the hegemony, of one of the two. It was only by breaking this bipolar nuclear monopoly that a state could break the political monopoly as well. 'National independence', de Gaulle was convinced, was 'unimaginable for a country [that] does not dispose of nuclear arms'.⁵⁹

As he writes in his memoirs, de Gaulle explained this conviction to John Foster Dulles in their first meeting, in July 1958. 'There is no France worth its mettle,' de Gaulle said, 'especially in the eyes of the French, without world responsibilities.'

That is why she does not approve of NATO, which does not give her proper due in its decisions and which is limited to Europe alone. That is also why she is going to acquire atomic weapons. In that way, our defence and our policies can be independent, which is what we find important above all else.⁶⁰

When the first French nuclear test at Reggane was successful two years later, France had 'taken her independence back in hand'.⁶¹

In making the link between the bomb and political independence, de Gaulle's deputies were sometimes even more zealous than the General himself. Michel Debré, for example, argued in the National Assembly as early as

1956 that 'nations without bombs are satellites', and Alexandre Sanguinetti (even more colourfully) asserted that 'countries without their finger on the [nuclear] trigger will be auxiliaries, playing the role of Moroccan soldiers in the French army of the last war'.⁶² Somewhat more restrained, but equally illustrative, was Couve de Murville in 1958:

As the nuclear bomb . . . remains the essential element of a modern army, all those . . . countries [which remain non-nuclear] would be renouncing the possession of the elements of a true defence, and consequently would be placing the responsibility for their defence completely in the hands of the nuclear powers. It is easy to see what the consequences of this would be in five, ten or twenty years. A country like France can envisage no such thing.⁶³

In short, for de Gaulle and for those around him, nuclear weapons were the key to national independence.⁶⁴ For France to depend on its allies for nuclear protection would be to subordinate itself both militarily and politically to them.⁶⁵ 'A great state which does not possess [nuclear weapons]', de Gaulle believed, 'does not command its own destiny.'⁶⁶ And commanding its own destiny was essential for France.

We have already seen why de Gaulle believed an independent nuclear force was essential to French security and the point need not be laboured here. When the Americans had a nuclear monopoly, France, perhaps, was protected. But now that the Russians also had the capability of destroying the other superpower's homeland, 'extended deterrence' could not be guaranteed. Neither superpower would be willing to run the risk of total destruction that global nuclear war would bring and as a result would seek to limit any war to Europe itself. The only way to prevent this, de Gaulle believed, was for the Europeans themselves (and this meant France) to possess atomic capabilities. For if France could guarantee an aggressor that it could 'tear off' that aggressor's 'arm', there would be no attack. By endowing itself with nuclear weapons, France was making sure that deterrence would work.

For all these reasons, Charles de Gaulle and those around him believed that the possession of nuclear weapons was a path toward bigger and better things in the world. Even at the cost of billions and billions of francs, and in the face of domestic and international opposition, de Gaulle and his governments went ahead with the construction of the *force de frappe*. Nuclear weapons would not only help to ensure French national security but would provide great-power status, respect, national independence, political influence, technological benefits, and a strong executive state. French leaders of the 1960s were convinced—and their successors appear to have been convinced as well—that joining the nuclear club was worth the price.

The 'Relevance' of the *force de frappe*

The final question that remains to be addressed here, then, is whether de Gaulle and these other Frenchmen were right. To assess the impact of French

nuclear weapons on world stability and international relations, it is not enough to show that Charles de Gaulle and his supporters believed that they would have such an impact. It is instead necessary—though immeasurably more difficult—to ask whether the French bomb actually did matter, and if so, how.

A number of observers who have studied the question have concluded that the French *force de frappe* has had little effect on international relations. Not surprisingly, opponents of the cost and morality of nuclear weapons in France, and also those who have seen all nuclear weapons as ‘essentially irrelevant’, have argued that de Gaulle was wrong to count on the increased status or security the bomb was supposed to bring.⁶⁷ What is more interesting, though, is that even many of those who believe that nuclear weapons have generally played a stabilizing role in international politics have seen the *French* deterrent as inconsequential. For example, Raymond Aron—France’s top strategic thinker and a firm believer in nuclear deterrence—argued in 1976 that:

as long as the present conjuncture lasts, as long as American troops are stationed in Western Europe, no one can imagine a scenario in which the French nuclear force would deter the Soviets from an aggression that would not have been deterred by the American force.⁶⁸

Going even further, McGeorge Bundy—a believer like de Gaulle in the concept of ‘nuclear danger’—has asserted that:

It is not easy to find evidence of the exercise or even the existence of . . . [the] responsibilities [de Gaulle believed nuclear status would confer on France.] Where has the international role of France been larger because of the French bomb? Has that bomb had a role in Africa or in the Middle East? Have the non-nuclear neighbors of France been willing to accept French leadership because France has bombs and they do not? Has French influence been visibly greater in Moscow or London or Washington? Surely if the possession of the bomb had the political meaning that de Gaulle so confidently asserted, one would expect to find traces of that meaning in the historical record of the decades since he spoke. Ardent defenders of the Gaullist view often assert that the French bomb has reinforced French diplomacy, but I am aware of no concrete demonstration of these assertions.⁶⁹

Both Aron and Bundy have a point. Looking back over the more than three decades of French nuclear history, it is difficult to find a single specific, concrete case where it can be demonstrated that the French bomb has played a deterrent role, or even contributed greatly to general ‘nuclear danger’. Still, the fact that the archives—even if they were open—would not reveal any ‘smoking guns’ does not mean that the French nuclear adventure has been a waste of time. A careful reflection on the French experience reveals that even if few explicit ‘traces of the meaning of nuclear weapons’ can be found, the ‘irrelevance’ of the French nuclear force cannot be taken for granted. De Gaulle and the Gaullists often exaggerated the potential impact of the French atomic bomb, but their logic was not unfounded, and it has not lost its power over the years.⁷⁰

First, it is important to acknowledge the importance of the psychological benefits that de Gaulle believed would result from the bomb. After ignominious defeat in World War II, followed by not much better results in Indo-China and Algeria, the French in the late 1950s—and in particular the French military—needed something to stand for. They had known war (and frustration) for nearly two decades, and it had left a sour taste in their mouths. By endowing the country with nuclear weapons—rightly or wrongly the modern sign of great power status—de Gaulle was showing his countrymen that they could indeed accomplish great things. To the extent that de Gaulle's grand design was to restore French self-confidence, the bomb can be seen as a key step toward that goal. More than anything, de Gaulle was a national psychologist, and for him nuclear status was a therapy that could not be forgone.⁷¹

Closely related to these psychological factors, it may well be that the French bomb also contributed to the feeling—and in part even the reality—of the national independence with which it was so often rhetorically linked. To be sure, it is difficult to imagine how France's possession of even the most powerful tactical or strategic nuclear weapons would have altered the course of events of some of the crises of the Cold War. For example, in the classic test-case of the 1956 Suez crisis—after which the French government of Guy Mollet reversed its opposition to French nuclear weapons—how would a *force de frappe* have played a role? Would the Russians have been less ready to brandish their nuclear 'threat' had France possessed nuclear missiles of its own? The fact that the British, a nuclear power fighting alongside the French, were subject to a similar threat (along with the fact that this Russian posturing in fact played little or no role in the denouement of the crisis anyway) suggests not. Would the Americans, whose financial manoeuvres *did* have an effect on the British and French, have decided not to pressure the colonial powers? Because a French nuclear attack on Washington in response to such pressure is hardly credible, it is difficult to imagine why this might have been the case. Finally, would a French bomb have changed the course of events on the battlefield itself? That the French-British-Israeli armies were easily winning the military battle anyway suggests that there was no need for the bomb here even if one could come up with a practical way to use it. Suez (or indeed any other factual or counterfactual case-study of the French bomb), would seem to contradict Gaullist logic.

Yet Suez does suggest, at least, how the possession of atomic weapons might contribute to political and military independence under these or other circumstances. The mechanism that would come into play would be the complex and difficult-to-measure one of confidence. If a nuclear France were sufficiently self-assured in its possession of a nuclear force that it knew it would not have to depend on the United States for its security, it just might be willing to stand up more forcefully to the United States. And the United States, knowing this, would be somewhat less willing to exert pressure that might not work. If the issue at stake in Suez had been something greater than a colonial dispute—and instead something in which the French had an overriding vital interest

like Berlin, Germany, or even France itself—it is easy to see how the French possession of a deterrent force would allow France to act independently of its Atlantic ally. If the Americans had been willing to make concessions over Berlin or Cuba, for example—something that de Gaulle feared and certainly could not exclude—would the ultimate security afforded by a proportional deterrent not give de Gaulle the confidence to make his own voice heard? The French argument was not so much that the bomb would permit them to *resolve* crises like Suez with the atomic bomb, but rather that by believing themselves more secure because of the bomb, they could take risks that a non-nuclear power would not dare take.

Did it ever work out this way in practice? Was de Gaulle better able to pursue his revisionist diplomacy because of the existence of a French bomb? One is easily tempted to doubt it. Though many Gaullists assert a link between the deployment of the *force de frappe* and the beginning of France's global diplomacy in the mid-1960s,⁷² the timing of this concurrence is probably due to other factors, such as the end of the Algerian War, de Gaulle's re-election by universal suffrage in 1965, and the fact that the 75-year-old de Gaulle knew he had little time left to implement the rest of his grand design. It is surely a great exaggeration to suggest that the possession of nuclear weapons somehow permitted de Gaulle to criticize the Bretton Woods monetary system, recognize China, withdraw from NATO commands, castigate American policy in Vietnam, pursue détente with the Soviet Union, and call for a free Quebec. Finally, it should not be forgotten that de Gaulle was hardly one to bow to 'realities' because of an absence of means. He was, after all, the man who stood up to the Germans, British, and Americans in World War II as the leader of a country that had hardly any means at all; the General did not necessarily need powerful weapons to speak his mind.⁷³

Instead, a much more viable thesis is that de Gaulle was preparing his country for the future. So long as he was running the show himself, French interests as he saw them would surely be asserted, even in the absence of a truly 'independent' defence. But would the same be true in the years to come? Would French leaders not revert back to what de Gaulle saw as the subordination of the Fourth Republic, when French foreign policy was constrained because of a dependence on the United States for defence? De Gaulle did not want to take the chance. He would endow France with a powerful and invulnerable nuclear force that would make it possible for his successors—if warranted by events—not to follow quietly the policies of their protector, the United States. If another Suez ever took place, the French would not be obliged to give in over Strasbourg (as in late 1944) as they had done.⁷⁴

Finally, and most important, the French have developed over the years the capability to remove instantaneously whole civilizations from the face of the earth, the same capability that has supposedly contributed to international stability in the case of the superpowers. To be sure, few would argue that the French force of 62 Mirage bombers in the 1960s ever deterred the Soviets, who probably appreciated it as a divisive factor within the Atlantic Alliance more

than they feared it as a deterrent. Even de Gaulle himself may have believed—though he could never admit it—that the French of the mid-1960s could not really ‘tear off’ enough of the Russian Bear’s arm to scare it, and anyway, that the American threat to tear off its head was enough.⁷⁵ But once again, de Gaulle’s nuclear force was primarily a project for the long term. As de Gaulle explained as late as 1968,

Yes, we are building a nuclear armament. . . . It is a long-term project. . . . We are not making it for tomorrow, but for generations, in a completely new system of defence and deterrence. And in this long space of time, who can say what the evolution of the world will be?⁷⁶

De Gaulle was working at that time to build a force of nuclear submarines and ballistic missiles—deployed only after his departure—that was meant to be a significant threat in later decades, after the American guarantee had continued to erode. Today, with the modernization of the French strategic nuclear force (ironically under François Mitterrand, de Gaulle’s historic adversary and the greatest opponent of the original *force de frappe*) enabling France to deploy hundreds of relatively invulnerable warheads, who can say that the French bomb is not capable of playing a deterrent role? If one accepts the mechanism by which any deterrent works, surely France’s capacity to set off that mechanism must be taken into account.

In conclusion, the significance of the *force de frappe* should not be sought in the same way that we have tried to understand the role of the American or Soviet nuclear forces. As Bundy and Aron argue, if we look for concrete documentation affirming the success of French deterrence, we will not find it. Instead, the ‘relevance’ of the French nuclear force should be assessed in terms of the context in which it was built: it was designed as a source of pride and unity—the sort of *vaste entreprise* to which de Gaulle’s memoirs allude—in a country that badly needed both; it has given French leaders added fuel in their claims to world-power status and in their ambitions to play an active role in the world; it has been an ultimate shield in an uncertain world; and finally—as France’s Atlantic allies recognized formally in 1974—it has contributed, as one more element of uncertainty, to deterrence based on nuclear danger.⁷⁷ These are perhaps modest conclusions for a project with sometimes immodest aims; but where nuclear weapons are concerned, a little bit can go a long way.