

Why French Troops Are Wanted

The Sense of Insecurity In West Germany

Bonn

"West Germany is a small country, only 200 miles wide. In case of a Soviet attack it will have to be defended from the outside. Our air force will have to operate from Spain or Portugal; both are willing to grant us bases there and our training program could start soon. But what will happen should de Gaulle refuse us the right of overfly? Even our training base in Italy, on the island of Sardinia, will no longer be usable. We need the French hinterland for our defense."

That's the talk here explaining why West Germany accepted de Gaulle's offer to negotiate the continuing presence of French troops in Germany in spite of France's withdrawal from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. German acceptance of de Gaulle's offer didn't particularly please Washington, and if French troops remain on West German territory after France has left NATO, this will look to many Germans like a return to a period of occupation, giving France a superior status and helping de Gaulle's scheme of making his country the uncontested leader of Western Europe. But it's imperative for Germany that the number of Allied troops in Germany should not be drastically cut, and the United States is transferring 15,000 American troops, perhaps the cream of its six divisions in Europe, to Vietnam. Should the 70,000 troops that France has now on German soil be withdrawn, who will replace them? The answer is: nobody.

The two French divisions represent only about 10 percent of the total NATO forces in Germany, but the two divisions have recently been modernized and represent a potentially serious force. For a long time the Bonn government wanted them moved close to the border of East Germany; Paris always made the excuse that there are no good barracks there. But Bonn has reason to be well satisfied with the geographic location of other French units on German soil. All the air defenses of Bavaria and a substantial part of other areas in South Germany are manned by French anti-aircraft formations armed with Hawk missiles, and there are excellent French radar units and squadrons of interception planes. In radar installations alone, the French maintain in Germany over 1,000 experts who cannot be replaced.

The Germans, like other Europeans, don't expect a

Soviet attack in the foreseeable future, but the whole existence of West Germany is based on the conviction that she has strong friends, stronger than her enemies, and that they will rush to her defense at the first sign of danger. The presence of American, British and French troops on German soil is a material proof of this, and anything which makes this proof less evident, less convincing, is considered by the Germans as a first-class disaster. Withdrawal of French troops would be so regarded, especially when the Germans believe rumors that soon entire American divisions will be transferred from Europe to Vietnam.

The feeling that de Gaulle holds trump cards, and doubts about the solidity of US support, are what now dictate Bonn's policy. But the German policymakers hope, and even believe, that the US will also decide finally to begin bilateral talks with de Gaulle. The Germans think negotiations will be lengthy; they suspect the French will not be in a hurry. They say it would be good if the Americans adopted the same tactic. They suspect that de Gaulle's dramatic gestures were made more to force Washington into negotiations, and on subjects outside the limit of the present Atlantic alliance, than to get a few thousand American troops out of France.

The continuing presence of French troops on the soil of Germany could be balanced, on paper at least, by the presence of a few German battalions on French soil, undergoing training there, which is exactly what has been going on for several years now. The main difficulty would not be German-French agreement over stationing of troops on each other's territory, but common strategy for the defense of Germany, because this cannot be only a Franco-German affair, but involves the Americans, the British, and other Allies with troops in Germany. A kind of "little NATO" limited to the defense of Germany in practice could be at least a stop-gap solution.

If there are important people in Washington who believe the best reply to de Gaulle is to ignore him and continue a "business as usual" attitude in NATO, they have no counterpart in Bonn. The German communiqué expressing willingness to start bilateral talks with France contained a reference to the treaty concluded between de Gaulle and Adenauer on January 22, 1963, which remained a "*chiffon de papier*," since the old Chancellor resigned shortly afterwards. Until now the agreement had not been mentioned again. But it looks as if the leaders in Bonn, however much they may distrust de Gaulle, have decided that they have no choice but to enter into a kind of partnership with him. It may not be a marriage of love, or one that Washington will approve. But compelling reasons may force the Germans into it.

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