

All Gaullists now

Europe sounds increasingly French

The continent confronts a future without Trump's America



The general who got it right - Photograph: Getty Images

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“The real victim of this affair”, he concluded, is “the Atlantic alliance...If our allies have abandoned us in difficult, if not dramatic, circumstances, they would be capable of doing it again if Europe in turn found itself in danger.”

A European leader today responding to Donald Trump's brazen decision to suspend American military aid to Ukraine? In fact this was Christian Pineau, the French foreign minister, after the Suez crisis in 1956. Then, America forced Britain and France to pull back from their joint military adventure. Britain concluded that it had to hug America close; France, that Europe needed to stand on its own feet.

In response, Charles de Gaulle, founder of the modern French republic, went on to develop France's independent nuclear deterrent and, in 1966, to pull out of NATO's military command. Ever since, devotion to the Gaullist doctrine has been as central to mainstream thinking on the left and right in France as it has been dismissed, and mocked, by European friends as Gallic grandstanding.

No longer. Atlanticist Europeans are turning Gaullist. Mette Frederiksen, Denmark's prime minister, led the way after Mr Trump threatened to annex Greenland. “Everyone in Europe can see that it will be a different collaboration with the USA now,” she warned. Friedrich Merz, Germany's probable future chancellor and another staunch Atlanticist, went further, urging Europe to “achieve independence” from America. “We have all turned into Gaullists,” said Caspar Veldkamp, the Dutch foreign minister.

Paris is quietly smug. Emmanuel Macron, France's president, has been warning fellow Europeans since he was first elected in 2017 about “a gradual and inevitable disengagement by the United States”, urging them to build “Europe's autonomous operating capabilities”. Which may help explain why, as discombobulating as Mr Trump's behaviour is, the French are less floored than other Europeans by the prospect of doing without America.

The trouble with France's case is that it has not matched its urgent speeches with a proportionate rise in defence spending. The country has only just exceeded NATO's 2014 target of 2% of GDP. The problem for its allies is that disentangling dependence on America is, in the short run, almost impossible. ■