The politics of grandeur
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Ideological aspects of de Gaulle’s foreign policy

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For Marion Kerr
Preface

The argument which is set out in this book was first conceived during a year of study in Paris in 1965–6. The conditions surrounding the 1965 presidential election campaign and the elections of 5 and 19 December of that year, and the context of the foreign policy crises of the day – the French boycott of the meetings of the (European Economic Community) Council of Ministers between June 1965 and January 1966, and the French withdrawal from the integrated military organisation of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) followed by the expulsion of American forces from French bases – created distinct impressions. These have been refined, expanded and developed into an extensive reappraisal of the meaning and significance of Gaullist foreign policy in contemporary world politics.

All of this was viewed at the time through the eyes of an American student of political science – accustomed to the rituals and dynamics of politics in a presidential system. It appeared that, as an element common to domestic and foreign affairs in the Fifth Republic, was a single connecting problem, that of consensus-building, or, in other words, of defining and specifying certain rules of the political and governmental game, rules which would come to be taken for granted by most, if not all, of the groups and parties which participate in French politics.

The enormity of this task, and the fragility of previous attempts to start along this path, were made clear not only in ordinary conversation, but also in the dominant themes of literature on French political history. The role of the office of President of the Republic, a role which had expanded and taken on a new symbolic meaning with the accession of General de Gaulle and the inauguration of the Fifth Republic in 1958, appeared to be the key. Indeed, de Gaulle was to state in 1967 that his primary political goal was to ensure that the presidency should become ‘second nature’ to the French people. Thus, if the new form of authority embodied in the Fifth Republic were, to use Max Weber’s
expression, to be ‘legitimated’, then the most important factor in this process of consensus-building would be the image which was popularly held and accepted of the role which the president ought to play. To look ahead in the argument, it was necessary to create a ‘symbol of the whole’ – a widely held sense that the national constituency of the president somehow made him the guardian of the national interest – and to implant and internalise that symbol in the minds and the behaviour patterns of the French body politic.

Foreign policy was to play a critical role in this process. Achieving this objective required the linking of the new structure of authority with the more submerged set of feelings and reactions which are called ‘national consciousness’. This is the feeling that a person belongs to an overarching political association in which not only do its members have more in common with each other than they have with other groups, but also, as Aristotle says, the different members of the association feel a spontaneous concern for the moral welfare of their fellow citizens. It is a commonplace that war has on occasion in history formed or reinforced a solidarity of this sort. And foreign policy can, under certain circumstances, play the role of a sort of war-in-microcosm. Thus the linkage of foreign policy with a new structure of authority can create a psychological association of national identity with authority, thus giving that authority a profound ‘legitimacy’. There are inherent dangers to this strategy, it must be said, and an overambitious foreign policy can be counterproductive. But if it works it can be extremely effective.

For reasons which will be developed in detail in this book, it is suggested that such, indeed, was General de Gaulle’s intention. Given his taste for public dramaturgy, his ‘certain idea of France’, and given the interrelated roles of the President of the Republic as the only political figure with a national constituency, as the chief maker of foreign policy, and as a symbolic head of state, foreign policy was necessarily involved very closely in the consensus-building process. The ultimate significance of such a strategy, however, is its effectiveness. We believe that there is sufficient evidence, both direct and circumstantial, to demonstrate that Gaullist foreign policy was indeed effective in helping to achieve this goal. Indeed, we feel that our argument stands up better to historical testing than do the received alternatives. The implications are potentially significant not only for the study of foreign policy and international relations, but also for French politics itself.

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Chapter 5 has appeared in the *British Journal of International Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1 (April 1979).

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P.G.C.