Gaullists and Europe: France's Postwar Strategy for Independence and Integration

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Introduction

This book examines how France's Gaullists transformed the paradox between national independence and European integration into a workable grand strategy. Rather than treating sovereignty and supranational cooperation as opposites, Gaullist leaders approached Europe as a multiplier of French agency—an arena in which a strong state could shape rules, bargain for advantages, and project influence beyond its size. The result was a distinctive blend of diplomatic maneuver, economic planning, and institutional design that set France on a path from postwar recovery to a durable, if often contested, leadership within European structures.

The argument proceeds from three premises. First, foreign policy makes sense only when read alongside the political economy that supports it. France's postwar dirigisme and planning apparatus were not mere domestic choices; they were instruments for negotiating at Brussels with credible commitments and clear sectoral priorities. Second, European institutions were never static constraints. By leveraging agenda-setting power in the Council, exploiting the strategic value of the Common Agricultural Policy, and calibrating relations with the Commission and Court, Paris repeatedly converted rules into resources. Third, Cold War geopolitics provided both pressure and opportunity. The United States and NATO set outer limits and supplied security, yet Gaullist doctrine—culminating in the nuclear force and withdrawal from NATO's integrated command—sought room for maneuver that could be traded for influence within Europe.

A recurring theme is the disciplined use of linkage. French negotiators tied agricultural financing to market-building, industrial modernization to tariff schedules, and monetary choices to institutional reforms. These linkages helped France secure concessions, but they also entrenched a pattern of mutual dependence that anchored the Community itself. The famous crises—vetoes of British entry, the Fouchet Plan, the Empty Chair—were not rejections of Europe so much as attempts to recast integration on terms compatible with state sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

Equally important is the domestic machinery behind the diplomacy. The interplay among the planning office, finance and foreign ministries, the agricultural lobby, and the Permanent Representation in Brussels produced a coordinated—if sometimes contentious—policy engine. Technocrats translated national plans into negotiable European packages; politicians supplied doctrine and narrative; societal coalitions provided the staying power needed to weather shocks from May 1968 to the oil crises. Understanding this ecosystem clarifies why French positions were often consistent over time even as governments changed.

The book also reframes Gaullism as a tradition rather than a single figure’s worldview. While Charles de Gaulle set the template—sovereignty first, Europe as a vehicle, Atlantic ties on French terms—successors adapted it to shifting realities, from Pompidou’s pragmatism and British accession to later experiments in monetary and security cooperation. What looks like inconsistency across decades is better seen as strategic adaptation within a stable hierarchy of objectives: preserve freedom of action, shape European rules, and convert economic strengths into diplomatic leverage.

Finally, this study speaks to readers of diplomacy, EU history, and statecraft by linking archival episodes to enduring concepts: veto power versus voice opportunities, institutional path dependence, and the politics of side payments. It shows how a mid-sized power used planning, coalition-building, and institutional entrepreneurship to punch above its weight—less by saying “no” than by structuring the terms on which “yes” became possible.

By tracing these dynamics from coal and steel to agriculture, from defense autonomy to monetary debates, the chapters that follow map France’s postwar strategy for independence and integration. They offer not only a narrative of crises and bargains, but also a toolkit for understanding how states navigate—and reshape—the complex web of European institutions.

CHAPTER ONE: Liberation and the Sovereignty Principle

France in 1944 looked both forward and backward at once. Liberation from Nazi occupation brought an intoxicating rush of possibility, yet it also revived older arguments about the state's shape and purpose. Men and women who had endured shortages, censorship, and occupation reentered public life with a shared insistence that the French state must be strong enough to guard its independence. That insistence would become the lodestar of postwar policy, even as the question of how to combine that independence with new forms of European cooperation began to take shape.

At the center stood a general whose very silhouette suggested resolve. Charles de Gaulle had staked France's honor on a stubborn refusal to accept defeat in 1940. He returned to Paris in 1944 with a conviction that France must recover its own sovereignty quickly, and then deploy that sovereignty to shape a new Europe. The wartime Free French experience taught him that coalitions mattered, but that France needed its own weight—military, economic, and diplomatic—to be listened to. Sovereignty was not a nostalgic slogan; it was a practical tool.

The provisional government he led immediately set about reclaiming the state's capacity. Between 1944 and 1946, it nationalized core industries—coal mines, electricity, gas, Renault—and created new planning institutions. The Commissariat général du Plan was founded in 1946, with Jean Monnet at its head, to coordinate reconstruction. These steps were presented not as ideology but as wartime and postwar necessities. In a shattered economy, the market could not conjure investment or infrastructure overnight; the state had to.

Sovereignty was not merely economic. It involved the power to choose alliances, to set strategy, and to avoid dependence. De Gaulle's government sought a security architecture in which France would be a decision-maker, not a recipient of orders. That aspiration led him to Paris' wartime focus on Germany and to a persistent idea that Europe should be organized in a way that prevented either German revanchism or Anglo-American dominance. French eyes were already scanning the horizon for institutions that could bind Germany without diluting French autonomy.

Inside the liberation government, politics were far from tidy. De Gaulle faced pressure from Communists, Socialists, Christian Democrats, and a press that often split along old lines. Within months of liberation, strikes and demonstrations reminded the general that unity was a fragile commodity. His resignation in January 1946, following a dispute over the powers of the future president versus a parliamentary assembly, revealed a central fault line: how strong should the executive be to defend national sovereignty? The Fourth Republic's constitution would choose a weak presidency and a strong parliament. De Gaulle saw that as a recipe for drift.

The Fourth Republic, inaugurated in October 1946, promised a break with Vichy and a return to republican normality. It also created a system of parties prone to fragmentation and cabinet turnover. Yet beneath the political turbulence, a remarkably consistent foreign policy emerged, one that took sovereignty as its baseline. French diplomats aimed to anchor the Federal Republic of Germany in a European framework, secure reparations and industrial safeguards, and rebuild French power. Sovereignty would be protected by creating rules that others could not easily rewrite.

On the ground, the realities were grim. Cities were scarred, rail lines severed, farms understocked. The winter of 1946–47 was brutally cold. Rationing persisted well into 1947. French authorities had to prioritize food, fuel, and transport. In this environment, the idea of a supranational Europe had only limited appeal unless it could deliver concrete relief. The Marshall Plan's offer of aid in 1947–48 promised a lifeline, but it also raised fears of American dominance and the erosion of policy autonomy. Paris negotiated for aid with an eye to preserving room to maneuver.

Marshall Plan assistance arrived alongside new institutions. The Organization for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) was created in 1948 to distribute and coordinate American aid. Through the OEEC, France practiced the art of European-level negotiation without surrendering national control. French planners used the organization to argue for sectoral priorities—steel, electricity, transport—that matched domestic plans. They were learning that cooperation could be a tool of sovereignty when structured in the right way.

German questions sat at the heart of French security policy. The Ruhr's industrial capacity had powered the German war machine; its future was a French preoccupation. In 1948–49, negotiations over the International Authority for the Ruhr sought to place limits on German steel output and establish international oversight. France obtained concessions, but its leverage was incomplete without British and American support. This episode taught Paris a lesson: sovereignty in Europe required both a seat at the table and the leverage to shape outcomes.

In 1949, two developments reshaped the map. The Federal Republic of Germany was created in the western zones, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bound France to a transatlantic security guarantee. NATO offered protection against the Soviet threat, but it also tied France to American command structures and strategy. French policymakers accepted NATO as necessary but maintained a careful distance, insisting that France should be a partner, not a subordinate. This early ambivalence foreshadowed later Gaullist assertions of autonomy within the alliance.

France’s military posture remained ambitious. It maintained forces in Germany as part of the occupation regime and intervened in Indochina beginning in 1946. Indochina proved costly in blood and treasure, revealing the gap between ambitions and resources. Sovereignty demanded choices: commit resources abroad or consolidate them at home to strengthen the state’s capacity? The balance was never simple, and each commitment pulled at France’s ability to influence Europe’s architecture. Sovereignty meant prioritizing.

Domestically, the Communist Party remained a powerful force until its expulsion from government in May 1947. The Cold War’s hardening pushed Paris toward closer Atlantic ties and weakened the left’s influence on foreign policy. The new Tripartite coalition of Socialists, Christian Democrats, and moderate conservatives aligned with Washington’s containment doctrine. Yet even as the Communists left government, their influence in unions and industry kept social tensions alive. Strikes and protests underscored the political fragility of a state still finding its feet.

The Monnet Plan, launched in 1946, provided the blueprint for reconstruction. It aimed to increase coal and steel output through targeted investment, modern equipment, and strict prioritization. By 1948, production had begun to climb, and the plan’s technical committees—staffed by civil servants, engineers, and industry representatives—created a cadre of planners comfortable with the language of targets and coordination. These planners would become crucial interlocutors for European negotiations, capable of translating domestic needs into technical proposals at the European level.

Sovereignty also involved cultural and educational reconstruction. The post-liberation period saw an expansion of schooling and a renewed emphasis on French language and history. This was not mere pageantry; it was part of rebuilding a civic consensus. Public opinion, scarred by occupation and the experience of collaboration, wanted a state that could both protect and represent France’s identity. European cooperation had to pass the test of public legitimacy, which meant it had to be seen as advancing French interests, not diluting them.

Security concerns shaped economic decisions. French leaders feared that an uncontrolled German economy could once again become a threat. This led them to favor controls on German industrial output, particularly steel, and to argue for international supervision. Yet Britain and the United States were pressing for German economic recovery as part of European stability. Paris found itself negotiating a delicate balance: keep Germany anchored, restrain its military capacity, and accept its economic revival under safeguards. Sovereignty here meant managing constraints rather than eliminating them.

The European movement took its first formal steps in 1948 with the Congress of Europe at The Hague. French delegates, including some who would later become leading Gaullists, attended discussions about political, economic, and cultural union. The mood was optimistic, but there were already clear differences: some favored a supranational assembly with binding powers, others a confederation of sovereign states. The debates foreshadowed a permanent tension in French policy. Paris was interested in a Europe that magnified French influence, not one that absorbed it.

In 1949, the Council of Europe was created as a forum for intergovernmental cooperation. France took part enthusiastically, seeing value in a structure that allowed discussion without ceding decision-making power. For French diplomats, the Council represented an early model of sovereignty-compatible cooperation. Yet the Council’s lack of real authority soon revealed its limits. France wanted institutions that could deliver results, especially on economic and security matters, while keeping national control over key decisions.

Currency and trade mattered as much as security. France had to manage a balance-of-payments deficit and chronic shortages. In the OEEC, Paris negotiated for trade liberalization that would allow access to goods while pushing for exceptions to protect sensitive sectors. French policy blended openness and protection—“Europe yes, but not at any price.” Sovereignty meant choosing which markets to open and which to shield. This hybrid approach became a hallmark of French strategy in European negotiations.

As the Cold War deepened, Berlin emerged as the front line. The Soviet blockade of 1948–49 and the Berlin Airlift highlighted France’s dependence on American power. While Paris valued the Atlantic link, it also fretted about being drawn into conflicts on terms it did not control. The solution, for French planners, was to bind Germany into European structures that could be influenced from Paris. Sovereignty was not just about resisting others; it was about creating rules that others would have to follow.

Behind the scenes, a new generation of technocrats was gaining influence. Graduates of the École Polytechnique and the École nationale d’administration began to populate the planning apparatus, ministries, and diplomatic services. They were comfortable with technical detail, comfortable with data, and less bound by old ideological divides. They could craft proposals that looked neutral and rational but advanced French priorities. Their rise gave the state a bench of negotiators able to operate at the European level with sophistication.

By 1950, the French position on Germany had reached a crossroads. Restraints were expiring, and German industrial recovery was accelerating. Something new was needed to channel that recovery in a direction France could accept. The Coal and Steel proposal took shape in secret talks in the spring of 1950. It offered a way to integrate

Germany's heavy industry into a common market overseen by a supranational authority. The pitch was both practical and symbolic: it promised peace through shared prosperity while keeping French eyes on the levers of control.

The Schuman Declaration of May 9, 1950, announced the plan to the world. Robert Schuman, the Foreign Minister, presented it as a step toward European peace and a means of securing French interests. Jean Monnet, the chief architect, envisioned a system that would make war between France and Germany "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible." For Paris, the plan was also a strategic instrument: it offered a way to lock German industry into rules that France could help set, preserving sovereignty while taming the German threat.

Domestic reactions were mixed. Some saw the Schuman Plan as a betrayal of national sovereignty, a ceding of control to an unknown body. Industrialists worried about competition; Communists denounced it as American-inspired. Yet key ministries and the planning apparatus supported the move, precisely because it promised to embed Germany in a framework that would protect French producers and allow Paris to leverage its coal and steel capacity. Sovereignty, in their view, could be exercised through shared rules.

International reactions were equally varied. Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg saw immediate benefits. Britain, wary of supranationalism and keen to protect its sovereignty, declined to join. Germany's Chancellor Konrad Adenauer quickly embraced the plan, seeing it as the path to rehabilitation and Westbindung. The United States gave enthusiastic support, viewing integration as a counterweight to Soviet influence. France found itself at the center of a project that was, for once, aligned with its own strategic needs.

In June 1950, the outbreak of the Korean War shocked Europe. It accelerated thinking on defense and security, underscoring the reality that European states were operating in a world shaped by superpower conflict. French policy, already preoccupied with Germany, now had to consider the military dimension more urgently. If coal and steel were the sinews of industry, force was the sinew of sovereignty. The balance between national defense and European cooperation would become a central preoccupation.

Back home, the Fourth Republic's fragile coalitions made sustained policy difficult. Yet on Europe, there was surprising continuity. Governments changed, but the core approach—build European institutions to manage Germany and recover French power—persisted. The Schuman Plan, the OEEC, and NATO were each pieces of a strategy that treated Europe not as a surrender of sovereignty, but as a new arena where sovereignty could be projected. That approach had been seeded in the liberation; by 1950, it was sprouting.

The sovereignty principle, then, was not a fixed doctrine but a practice. It meant rebuilding state capacity first, then using that capacity to design and manipulate European institutions. It meant insisting on a seat at the table and preparing the technical arguments to win there. It meant accepting Atlantic protection while reserving the right to disagree. It meant a Europe that was supranational enough to matter but intergovernmental enough to let France keep its hand on the levers. Liberation had cleared the ground; sovereignty would guide the construction.

Those who later called themselves Gaullists inherited this disposition. They would refine it, test it, and sometimes break with it, but the core intuition persisted: independence and integration could coexist if the state was strong, the plans were coherent, and the institutions were designed to magnify, not diminish, French agency. The postwar years provided the laboratory; the experiments would continue. And the sovereignty principle, born of liberation's trials, would shape France's choices for decades to come.