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The Gaullist Legacy in the French Defense Industry

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The Gaullist Legacy in the French Defense Industry

Master's Thesis

MAIR Global Political Economy

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Abstract:

This thesis is driven by a long-standing academic debate at the heart of French defense studies: whether Gaullist strategic autonomy should be understood primarily as a national doctrine anchored in sovereign industrial control, or as a set of principles increasingly adaptable to the European level. To address this debate, the study examines the enduring influence of Gaullism on France's defense industrial policy and evaluates how this legacy is being reshaped by contemporary geopolitical transformations. The analysis begins by revisiting De Gaulle's foundational articulation of strategic autonomy. It then compares the evolution of French and German defense industries under the pressures of financialization. Finally, the study assesses how the war in Ukraine and the revitalization of European defense cooperation have encouraged France to project elements of Gaullist autonomy through emerging European frameworks. Through these three chronological case studies, the thesis shows that Gaullism has evolved into a hybrid model: firmly rooted in national sovereignty yet progressively projected through European mechanisms. Ultimately, the thesis argues that Gaullism remains the dominant paradigm structuring France's defense industry, confirming the arguments of scholars who emphasize the resilience of the Gaullist national doctrine. However, its long-term relevance increasingly depends on its ability to shape a form of European strategic autonomy that strengthens national sovereignty rather than diluting it.

Chapter 1: Gaullism in the Literature: An Introduction

Since the end of the Second World War, France has consistently pursued a path that sets it apart from many of its allies, especially when it comes to defense and strategic decision-making. One of the key ideas that shaped this path is strategic autonomy. It refers to the ability of a country to make its own decisions in matters of defense, foreign policy and security, without relying too heavily on others. For France, strategic autonomy has never been just a slogan, it's been a long-standing national ambition, one that has left a deep mark on how the country has organized its defense industry over the decades. Yet, France has continuously struggled to

reconcile this ambition for global influence with the constraints of its material capabilities, limited budgets, changing industrial capacities, and growing competition from larger powers. The vision of *grandeur* (greatness) promoted by President Charles de Gaulle faces today a sobering reality: in the 21st century, France no longer occupies the central role on the international stage, it once held before World War II. This thesis seeks to explore how France can address, and perhaps even reverse, this perceived decline by focusing on a key dimension of its power: its defense industry. Indeed, at the heart of this dilemma lies the military-industrial sector, where questions of sovereignty, technological independence, and strategic alliances converge. This sector, still considered one of the crown jewels of French industry and expertise, remains deeply influenced by the legacy of Gaullism, the political philosophy inspired by Charles de Gaulle's ideas and actions during his presidency (1959–1969).

This scenario has sparked a rich scholarly debate about whether France's defense-industrial strategy remains fundamentally Gaullist or whether it reflects an emerging adaptation of Gaullism to European-level dynamics. Here, two major camps can be distinguished. The first group of scholars argues that the Gaullist heritage of national strategic autonomy remains central to French defense policy today. They emphasize de Gaulle's decision to develop an independent nuclear force, which still underpins France's strategic independence. They also defend the state-led, centralized industrial model that sustained France's capacity to act independently in defense procurement. Many of these scholars refer directly to de Gaulle's 1966 decision to withdraw France from NATO's integrated military command, which they interpret as a symbolic and institutional assertion of independence. Together, these scholars show that autonomy is not simply a political preference but a deeply institutionalized feature of the French defense culture, one that still today continues to shape weapons procurement, doctrine, and industrial policy. In contrast, a second camp stresses the growing necessity of European cooperation to face new geopolitical and economic realities. For these scholars, the national interest that de Gaulle fought so hard to protect is now intertwined with Europe's collective interest. They argue that European strategic autonomy can amplify France's global influence by embedding its national priorities within a broader framework, enabling Paris to lead rather than isolate itself. In their view, France's influence today depends less on unilateral independence and more on its ability to spearhead European initiatives in defense procurement, capability development, and joint operations. Here, the Gaullist ambition for *grandeur* is

reinterpreted at the European level, with France seeking to become a motor of a sovereign Europe capable of acting independently of external powers.

Some might argue that these two approaches converge on one crucial point: the shared determination to reduce or even end dependence on NATO and the United States (USA) in the defense industrial domain. This thesis will not address what could be considered a third, explicitly Atlanticist camp because, although this position remains influential in several European countries (Walker, 2015), it is extremely marginal, if not entirely absent, in France. Indeed, President Emmanuel Macron, who since his first election in 2017 has pushed for the development of European strategic autonomy, has made it clear that his goal is to build a European “pillar” within NATO (Institut Jacques Delors, 2018; Macron, 2018). This demonstrates that the two approaches examined in this thesis are not built in opposition to NATO, but rather within it, aiming to rebalance power relations, reduce American over-dominance, and strengthen the Alliance by ensuring that Europe (and France within it) can act as an equal partner to the USA.

This thesis will therefore address the following research question: To what extent does the Gaullist legacy of strategic autonomy continue to shape France’s defense industrial policy in the 21st century? Situated within the academic debate previously identified, the aim of this thesis is to show that the Gaullist legacy of strategic autonomy remains a truly decisive driver of French defense industrial policy since 1959, and that it is being reinterpreted rather than abandoned. In line with this perspective, and responding to the broader academic debate, we will argue that France continues to view its defense industry as a central pillar of national sovereignty and power projection, even as it adapts to market-driven dynamics and strengthens its cooperation with European partners to meet the challenges of the 21st century. To answer this research question, the thesis will be structured around three core subquestions, each explored through a case study. First, it will revisit the Gaullist foundations of French defense policy and the quest for Strategic Economy by examining de Gaulle’s speech to the French people on April 27, 1965, in which he outlines the stakes of France’s foreign policy of independence, a vision that directly shaped the organization of the defense industry under his leadership. Second, it will analyze how this legacy has been reinterpreted in the contemporary era, looking at the impact of market logics and financialization through a brief comparison between the French and German defense industries. Finally, it will investigate how the war in Ukraine, have tested France’s ability to maintain strategic autonomy while simultaneously

engaging in deeper European cooperation. Together, these three lines of inquiry will make it possible to assess whether the Gaullist legacy remains a viable framework for France's defense strategy today.

Why does this matter? First, because there's a growing academic discussion on France's strategic posture reveals enduring tensions between interpretations that emphasize the persistence of Gaullist autonomy and those that argue for a gradual shift toward a better European integration. While existing academic literature provides valuable perspectives on French defense policy, much of it examines Gaullism, European integration, or defense industrial policy in isolation, without offering a unified account of how these elements interact over time. Situating France's defense industry within this academic debate makes it possible to understand not only the shifts in policy, but also the enduring strategic constants that continue to shape French defense thinking. By following this evolution, the thesis aims to shed light not only on the continuity of France's strategic ambitions but also on the ways they have been reinterpreted to meet new geopolitical, economic, and technological challenges. Rather than providing an exhaustive account of every policy change, it will focus on key moments and structural shifts that best illustrate how the Gaullist legacy continues to inform France's approach to defense in the 21st century. It also matters, because France's approach has always been distinctive. While many countries have leaned heavily on alliances like NATO, France has often emphasized independence, developing its own nuclear force, protecting its industrial base, and later pushing for a stronger European defense identity.

This discussion must therefore begin with the academic debate that has divided scholars over the proper interpretation of France's defense strategy. The central question that has long animated French defense policy, and which remains widely debated in the academic literature, is how to reconcile France's ambition for strategic autonomy with the structural constraints it faces (economic, military, and political). Since the early Fifth Republic, France has sought to maintain its rank among the world's great powers but has had to do so with limited resources and in a security environment dominated by the USA and NATO. This tension between aspiration and capability continues to frame the scholarly debate. Within the French but also international literature, two broad interpretations emerge. The first stresses the enduring relevance of the Gaullist legacy, arguing that France must continue to cultivate its strategic autonomy at the national level, adapting its institutions and industrial base to new challenges

without abandoning the core principles established under de Gaulle. The second approach does not deny the Gaullist imprint but highlights its structural limits, explaining that in the face of globalization, financialization, and European integration, the pursuit of autonomy has been increasingly transferred to the European level. Therefore, Gaullism is reinterpreted less as a purely national project and more as a catalyst for building a European pillar of defense capable of balancing the American domination in the transatlantic alliance. Very little of the literature advocates for a bigger dependence on NATO or the USA, suggesting that the question is less whether France should be autonomous than at what level, national or European, this autonomy should be exercised.

A substantial body of literature supports the view that Gaullism continues to underpin French defense policy, albeit in an adapted form. Philippe de Gaulle's book titled *De Gaulle, mon père* (2003), offers a personal perspective on the ideological core of Gaullism, portraying his father's conviction that France must remain sovereign and capable of autonomous action. The book demonstrates how this philosophy justified key decisions such as the development of the force de frappe and the creation of a state-directed military-industrial complex. These measures were not merely symbolic but aimed at institutionalizing a durable framework of independence. Furthermore, in his book named *Mes Présidents 50 ans au service de la Ve République* (2004), Olivier Stirn reinforces the argument that this Gaullist worldview did not disappear after 1969 but was continuously reinterpreted by successive presidents. Pompidou sought to position France at the center of European integration without compromising sovereignty. Chirac's pursuit of a "multipolar" world order echoed de Gaulle's vision of balancing American dominance by empowering other centers of power, particularly Europe. Stirn highlights that Gaullism has evolved rather than been abandoned, adapting to new geopolitical realities while preserving the core ambition for national autonomy. Therefore, Gaullism remains the intellectual cornerstone for understanding French defense and security policy. Charles de Gaulle's own writings and speeches articulate a vision of France defined by sovereignty, independence, and what he famously called *grandeur*. In *Mémoires de guerre* (1954), he wrote: "All my life I have held a certain vision of France. [...] In my view, France cannot be France without greatness." (translated from French). It reflects a deliberate effort to maintain decision-making autonomy and ensure that France could act, if necessary, without relying on its allies, thereby preserving its role on the global stage. Kohl's book *French Nuclear Diplomacy* provides further evidence that French independence was operational as well as

ideological. Kohl argues that France's nuclear policy was designed to guarantee that ultimate decisions about national survival would remain in French hands, thereby reinforcing the credibility of deterrence. He notes that de Gaulle did not seek to define the idea of *grandeur* but saw it as requiring "vast enterprises". It is a never-ending struggle against relative decline to overcome domestic divisions and affirm France's place in the first rank of nations. (Kohl, 2015, p. 127). This underscores that autonomy was conceived as both a political and psychological necessity. Hoffmann (2022) adds a geopolitical economic perspective to this approach, explaining that state control over the defense sector allows the state to pursue discreet geoeconomic strategies, such as embargoes and sanctions, that would be impossible under a purely market-driven model. This reinforces the idea that national control over the defense industry is a strategic asset in Gaullist thinking.

Other scholars have examined how Franco-German dynamics have influenced the evolution of autonomy. Deschaux-Dutard (2022) argues that despite repeated efforts at defense cooperation, cultural and strategic differences have limited the depth of integration, forcing France to retain robust national capabilities. Similarly, Krotz (2015) attributes these divergences to the distinct historical constructions of national role and purpose in France and Germany, explaining why France must continue to emphasize national sovereignty as a core security value. Therefore, these works show the limitation of the European integration in the defense industry, emphasizing the need for strategic autonomy at a national level. Finally, de Gaulle's 1965 speech remains a key primary source for understanding the enduring relevance of autonomy. Although he emphasizes the importance of European defense cooperation, he insists that France must be capable of defending itself without relying on either the United States or its European partners, thereby highlighting the primacy of national-level autonomy. He explains that this can prove to be an advantage for European countries themselves. This logic remains strikingly relevant today: the war in Ukraine has prompted renewed calls for national rearmament and European defense investment precisely to reduce overdependence on U.S. political cycles and decision-making. In this sense, Gaullism continues to serve as a reference point for justifying both national and European efforts to build credible defense capacities.

A second group of scholars focuses on the structural limits of Gaullism and the evolution of French strategic autonomy towards a more Europeanized framework. This camp does not reject Gaullism *per se* but rather argues that the realities of today's international order, including budgetary constraints and the globalized defense market, necessitate a partial transformation of

the Gaullist approach. These authors highlight how strategic autonomy has progressively become a European project and how financial logics have reshaped the governance of the French defense industry. Lequesne and McKercher (2022) offer a comprehensive analysis of France's enduring ambition to act as a global player despite its structural position as a middle power. They frame France as a "middle power with global ambitions," stressing that its demographic, economic, and military constraints have consistently limited its capacity to act independently on the world stage (p.90). This tension was already present during the Gaullist decade. Their interpretation provides a crucial corrective to overly romanticized portrayals of Gaullist independence: strategic autonomy was less an absolute rupture from alliances than a pragmatic recalibration designed to offset structural vulnerabilities. This argument is particularly useful for understanding how the search for autonomy persists today under similar constraints, shaping both defense industrial policy and European security discourse.

Building on this structural perspective, O'Brien and Williams (2024) provide the conceptual tools needed to analyse the phenomenon of financialization as a structural constraint on defense policy. In the global political economy (GPE) literature, financialization refers to the growing dominance of financial markets in shaping economic activity. Applied to the defense sector, this dynamic puts pressure on states to adopt market-oriented approaches, privileging cost-efficiency, profitability, and competitiveness in defense manufacturing. This process risks subordinating strategic priorities to market logics, potentially undermining the traditional Gaullist model of a sovereign, state-led defense base, which emphasized technological sovereignty and the primacy of political over economic considerations. A concrete illustration of this tension can be found in the case of Thales Group. Thales is a publicly listed company, with over one-third of its capital owned by private investors. Nevertheless, the French state maintains a decisive 36 % stake, and Dassault Aviation controls an additional 30 % (Share and Shareholding, 2024). This hybrid governance structure exemplifies how financialization does not necessarily eliminate state influence but rather forced it to coexist with market imperatives. We will see later in this thesis that some other European countries like Germany chose a different approach. France thus seeks to preserve strategic control while leveraging private capital to sustain its defense industrial base, showing that Gaullist principles of sovereignty have been adapted rather than abandoned. This evolution highlights the pragmatic adaptation of Gaullist principles to new economic realities.

Building on this, Bozo (2016) provides historical depth to this argument by showing that Gaullism was never isolationist but aimed to construct a “European Europe” capable of acting collectively on the global stage (p.53). De Gaulle’s vision of strategic autonomy included the idea of a European defense pillar, complementary to NATO but free from U.S. dominance. Bozo’s analysis demonstrates that the European dimension was integral to Gaullism from the start, even if operationalization proved difficult in the 1960s. This insight allows us to view today’s efforts to promote European strategic autonomy not as a distinction from Gaullism but as its logical continuation under new institutional and geopolitical conditions. On this basis, Mlynarski (2024) argues that since the 1990s, European strategic autonomy has become a cornerstone of French defense policy, with deliberate attempts by France to socialize its strategic culture among European allies. He explains that this process does not negate national autonomy but instead embeds it in a collective European framework, reflecting a pragmatic adjustment to the realities of globalization.

Finally, Thierry Tardy, writing for the Institut Jacques Delors (2018), discusses the concept of a “European pillar of NATO,” which has gained renewed relevance in the context of the war in Ukraine and renewed transatlantic uncertainty with the Trump administration. The article calls for operationalizing this pillar by enhancing European coordination within NATO, strengthening contributions to collective capabilities, and ensuring greater European representation in NATO leadership. Therefore, according to this analysis, France’s challenge is to reconcile its ambition for leadership with the need to build consensus with key partners, such as Germany, the UK and the US. This article underlines that autonomy today cannot be achieved unilaterally; it requires European-level burden-sharing and institutional innovation. Taken together, these sources suggest that the Gaullist’s legacy has not been discarded but rather transformed. Structural limits and financial pressures have pushed France toward a more cooperative, Europeanized model of autonomy that tempers national ambition with the need for collective capacity-building and integration into global financial markets.

In terms of methodology, this thesis adopts a qualitative research design, relying primarily on secondary sources and historical case studies to address the research question. We will disaggregate the overarching puzzle of the thesis into three analytical sub-questions. Each sub-question is investigated through a targeted case study, allowing for a process-tracing

approach. This within-case method makes it possible to reconstruct the causal mechanisms linking France's strategic ambitions, industrial organization, and the challenges it faces.

We will therefore rely on congruence analysis and process tracing as complementary strategies. Congruence analysis is used to assess whether observed outcomes align with the expectations generated by the Gaullist framework, while process tracing identifies the sequence of decisions and structural pressures that shaped those outcomes. Evidence is drawn from a range of scholarly literature, policy papers, and primary sources (e.g., presidential speeches, official industry data), which together provide a triangulated analysis of the topic. This methodology seeks to offer a rigorous and nuanced understanding of the evolving role of Gaullism in French defense industry.

The rest of this thesis is organized into three chapters. Chapter 2 looks back at the Gaullist foundations of French defense policy, chapter 3 explores how this legacy has been reshaped in recent decades, showing how market pressures and financialization have changed the defense sector while still preserving its role as a pillar of sovereignty. Chapter 4 examines how recent crises, with a focus on the war in Ukraine, have put France's approach to the test, forcing it to balance national independence with deeper European cooperation.

Chapter 2: The Gaullist Foundations of French Strategic Autonomy

This chapter tackles the first sub-question of the thesis by revisiting the Gaullist foundations of French defense policy and the broader pursuit of strategic autonomy. The aim is to evaluate the two main scholarly perspectives introduced earlier: one that interprets Gaullism as a durable framework for French sovereignty, and another that emphasizes its structural limits and the gradual shift toward European cooperation. Authors such as Kohl (2015) and Hoffmann (2022) argue that Gaullism established a durable architecture of sovereignty, rooted in

independent nuclear forces and centralized industrial governance, that continues to guide French policy. In contrast, Lequesne and McKercher (2022) emphasize the structural limits of this model, pointing to France's constrained resources. This chapter contributes to evaluating these competing interpretations by returning to the source: Charles de Gaulle's April 27, 1965, speech, in which the principles of *grandeur*, national independence, and strategic autonomy were most clearly articulated. By examining how de Gaulle conceptualized sovereignty and organized the defense industrial base, the chapter assesses whether the Gaullist core remains analytically relevant or whether its foundations already contained the seeds of later European adaptation.

In the context of the Fifth Republic, General Charles de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 marked a decisive turning point in France's industrial and military sovereignty strategy, with the central aim of restoring the nation's *grandeur* (Lequesne & McKercher, 2022, p.82). This ambition was rooted in the pursuit of strategic autonomy, inseparable from the development of an independent nuclear deterrent and a robust national defense industry (Mlynarski, 2024, p.225). However, in Chapter 1 of his book *French Nuclear Diplomacy*, titled *The Nuclear Program of the Fourth Republic*, Kohl explains that in the immediate post-war years, France found itself in a position of considerable strategic and technological vulnerability. The country's nuclear program began with extremely limited resources, both material and human, and developed in a context made more difficult by the unwillingness of its Anglo-American allies to share their research (1972). French authorities were therefore forced to start from scratch. Kohl points out that the decision to equip France with a military nuclear capability preceded de Gaulle's return to power and was rooted in a broader objective of preserving national status and autonomy, alongside growing skepticism about the reliability of the American nuclear umbrella (Kohl, 1972, p.39). Nonetheless, it was de Gaulle who transformed this fragile initiative into a coherent doctrine of independence. His leadership gave meaning and direction to the nuclear project, embedding it within a broader vision of national sovereignty and global stature.

In his televised speech of April 27, 1965, de Gaulle himself acknowledged France's weakened position in the world after two devastating world wars, stressing that "*having once been a colossal people in terms of population, wealth, and power, we have come a long way to play our international role again.*" Yet, he firmly rejected resignation to decline, warning against the "temptation of renunciation" that might have condemned France to permanent mediocrity. For de Gaulle, greatness was not optional, it was a duty. As he had written a decade

earlier in *Mémoires de guerre* (1954), “All my life I have held a certain vision of France. [...] In my view, France cannot be France without greatness.” This political conviction had direct and lasting implications for France’s defense industry. *Grandeur* meant independence; and independence requires an autonomous defense industrial base capable of supporting national strategy without reliance on foreign suppliers. As Bozo (1996) demonstrates, de Gaulle’s reorganization of France’s military posture, including the development of the force de frappe, was a deliberate effort to ensure that industrial and military capabilities served French interests. In this sense, the foundations of France’s modern defense industrial policy were laid not merely in pursuit of military efficiency, but as a means of reclaiming political sovereignty and restoring the nation’s rank in the international order.

We will now do a short overview of de Gaulle’s speech. On April 27, 1965, a few months before the first French presidential election by universal suffrage, General Charles de Gaulle addressed the French people in a radio-televised speech to explain and defend the principles guiding France’s foreign policy. As was his habit, de Gaulle spoke directly to the nation, presenting his vision of France’s role in an increasingly polarized and dangerous world dominated by two superpowers, the USA and the Soviet Union. The core of his message is a passionate defense of national independence in the context of the Cold War. De Gaulle rejects the notion that France should submit to either of the dominant blocs, the American-led Western alliance or the Soviet system. While acknowledging the need for alliances, he refuses to let France become a subordinate member of the Atlantic system, arguing that such dependence would effectively erase the nation’s sovereignty. Similarly, he criticizes the idea of a fully integrated European federation that would dissolve the independence of its member states. For de Gaulle, European cooperation must be built on the free will and equality of nations, not on supranational control. He also highlights France’s foreign policy achievements since 1958: the reconciliation with Germany as the foundation of European peace; cooperation with neighboring countries; and the promotion of new relations with Eastern European nations gradually emerging from Soviet domination. Beyond Europe, France’s independence allows it to pursue an autonomous global policy, supporting decolonized nations in Africa, maintaining relations with Latin America, and recognizing the People’s Republic of China. De Gaulle insists that France’s diplomacy is guided by a universal principle: opposition to all forms of hegemony and foreign interference, and support for each nation’s right to determine its own destiny.

He then turns to the issue of defense, affirming the necessity of an independent nuclear deterrent to ensure that France alone holds the key to its security. Possessing such means, he argues, guarantees true sovereignty, since no ally should ever have the power to decide France's fate. This independence extends to the economic and scientific domains: France must rely on its own resources, strengthen research, maintain financial stability, and collaborate with others only when it does not threaten national autonomy. In conclusion, de Gaulle emphasizes that France's independent policy may surprise or even irritate other powers, especially the United States, but it restores balance to a world divided between two hegemonies. His final appeal is both patriotic and philosophical: for France to remain true to itself, to act freely and responsibly in world affairs, and to embody once again the universal values of liberty, equality, and fraternity: "*For us, as for everyone, more than ever, it is necessary that France remains France.*"

De Gaulle's 1965 speech remains a foundational text for understanding the enduring centrality of national sovereignty in French defense policy. To better understand how this speech was interpreted, it is useful to examine first the perspective that emphasizes the primacy of national-level strategic autonomy, a viewpoint that sees de Gaulle's reforms and policies as deliberate steps to secure France's independent capacity to act in defense and foreign affairs. De Gaulle articulates a vision of France as an autonomous actor in a bipolar world dominated by the USA and the Soviet Union: "*our independence requires that we have the means to deter by ourselves any potential aggressor, without our allies holding our destiny in their hands*". Here, De Gaulle articulates the philosophical and institutional foundations of what has remained a defining principle of French strategic culture: sovereignty as both a political necessity and a moral duty. This rejection of subordination is deeply rooted in the historical identity of the Fifth Republic.

De Gaulle's approach was not merely reactive to Cold War dynamics, but a coherent political doctrine designed to institutionalize independence. The persistence of this Gaullist logic can be traced through successive French presidencies. As Olivier Stirn (2004) and Philippe de Gaulle (2004) demonstrate in their books, the principles established by de Gaulle (nuclear deterrence, a strong state-led defense industry, and diplomatic independence) have been adapted but never abandoned. Indeed, the other Presidents of the Fifth Republic all upheld the idea that France must retain the means to act independently, even while engaging in European cooperation. The creation of the force de frappe and the development of a state-led

defense industry were instruments of this long-term project. In this speech, de Gaulle explain that these measures reflect not isolationism but a deliberate attempt to ensure that France could act freely on the international stage, maintaining both its credibility and its *grandeur*.

Scholars such as Kohl (2015) and Hoffmann (2022) further clarify why this logic still holds analytical weight. Kohl argues that French nuclear diplomacy was designed to guarantee ultimate decision-making power over national survival by ensuring that no foreign actor could dictate French defense policy. Hoffmann adds an economic dimension, explaining that state control over the defense industrial base enables France to conduct strategic policies, such as embargoes, sanctions and export controls, beyond the reach of market constraints. This reinforces the Gaullist conviction that political independence presupposes economic and industrial sovereignty. The main goal is to expand France's influence without surrendering decision-making authority. De Gaulle's insistence that "*our activities must remain, for the most part, under French administration and direction*" directly prefigures this argument. It anticipates modern debates about defense industrial policy, technological sovereignty, and resilience against foreign dependence. As Deschaux-Dutard (2022) and Krotz (2015) note, repeated difficulties in Franco-German defense cooperation illustrate why autonomy at the national level remains a functional necessity. The cultural and strategic divergences between European partners mean that complete defense integration remains elusive, forcing France to maintain robust independent capabilities.

Contemporary crises such as the war in Ukraine have reaffirmed the relevance of this model. Calls for national rearmament, energy independence, and industrial resilience echo De Gaulle's warnings against overdependence on allies. Even when France engages in European cooperation, the underlying logic remains Gaullist: cooperation is desirable only if it strengthens national autonomy rather than diluting it. This explains why successive French presidents, from Pompidou to Macron, have reinterpreted rather than rejected Gaullism. Ultimately, the national strategic autonomy approach remains the intellectual cornerstone of French defense policy. It remains dominant because, even as France recognizes its limited means, it insists on acting as a power of initiative rather than dependency. The conditions for collaboration are well defined: France must participate as an equal partner, not as a subordinate. Therefore, De Gaulle's principle that "*no ally should hold our destiny in their hands*" continues to shape both the discourse and the institutional architecture of French security policy, making Gaullism a living tradition.

This emphasis on national strategic autonomy naturally raises the question of how France can maintain its independence in an increasingly interconnected world. While we saw the importance of sovereignty at the national level, other scholars explore how Gaullist principles of autonomy have been adapted to a European framework, balancing collective defense and continental cooperation without sacrificing France's core independence.

This other approach emphasizes the Europeanization of strategic autonomy. While the rhetoric of national autonomy remains central to French political discourse, the operational reality of defense policy has evolved toward what scholars describe as a Europeanized form of Gaullism, arguing that France's ambition for independence must be pursued through Europe rather than against it. In his speech, de Gaulle argues that "*when it is appropriate to combine our inventions, capabilities, and resources in a particular field with those of another nation, we must often choose one of those who are closest to us, and whom we can trust not to overwhelm us*". This illustrates that his conception of autonomy was never purely nationalistic. Rather, it was grounded in a pragmatic understanding that cooperation among sovereign states could multiply capabilities without surrendering independence. As Lequesne and McKercher (2022) explain, France has long been a "middle power with global ambitions," whose resources do not match its aspirations. De Gaulle's 1965 speech already hinted at this tension: he acknowledged France's relative decline yet insisted that independence was achievable through will and organization. Scholars such as Bozo (2016) have demonstrated that the European dimension was already embedded in early Gaullism. He argues that de Gaulle's call for a "Europe of nations" was never isolationist but aimed at building a "European Europe" free from U.S. tutelage, aligning with de Gaulle's critique of the bipolar world order of Yalta (1945). His insistence on collaboration with European countries such as Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, reveals an early blueprint for what would later become the European defense project. In today's context, European strategic autonomy, as promoted by French President Emmanuel Macron, is thus the modern form of Gaullism under the conditions of globalization. It reflects an understanding that sovereignty must now be shared to be preserved. Far from negating national sovereignty, European cooperation allows France to project influence beyond its material limits while ensuring that Europe itself becomes less dependent on American strategic choices by translating its Gaullist ambition into collective structures. Therefore, the European approach has become a pragmatic reinterpretation of Gaullism. It acknowledges structural limits to national independence while preserving the core objective of strategic autonomy,

which is the very essence of de Gaulle's vision. This speech can therefore be re-read not as a call for isolation, but as a flexible blueprint for autonomy under changing conditions. France continues to seek greatness, but through European capacity-building rather than solitary power projection. In this sense, Gaullism survives as a Europeanized strategy for sovereignty: France and its European partners can collectively achieve the autonomy that none could maintain alone.

Thus, these scholars offer two very different interpretations of the same speech. To deepen our analysis, we must now compare these interpretations with the historical reality. Indeed, this will allow us to examine how General de Gaulle, who will be re-elected president for a second term one year after this speech, translated his ideas into action. As we shall see, he had already begun implementing these principles well before this speech, starting from his return to power in 1959. De Gaulle's unwavering commitment to independent decision-making was reflected in the creation and consolidation of powerful state institutions that played a key role in shaping French defense industrial policy by rigorously centralizing the processes of design, production, and maintenance of military equipment, ensuring alignment between political goals, military needs, and industrial capabilities (Calcara, 2017, p.530). As James W. Sterling noted in his 1974 report *The French Weapon Acquisition Process*, France's approach to weapons procurement reflected a national policy of self-sufficiency, shaped by constrained resources, a limited domestic market, and a unique politico-industrial system. This system was defined by centralized control through the DMA (Délégation Ministérielle pour l'Armement), close collaboration between the state and industry, and an emphasis on efficient, incremental development. The DMA was established in 1961 by President Charles de Gaulle as a unified procurement agency within the Ministry of Defense and was later renamed the Direction Générale de l'Armement (DGA) in 1977. It has played a central role in shaping the coherence of the French defense industry and exemplifies the broader policy of increased centralization (De Penanros & Serfati, 2000). Through the DGA, the French state actively steered the development of technical capabilities, often prioritizing strategic prestige and independence over cost-efficiency (Kowalski, 2024). The impetus provided by de Gaulle led to a profound transformation of the French defense industrial landscape during the 1960s. His government aimed to ensure French presence across all critical sectors of military technology. This policy facilitated the rise of major national defense firms such as Framatome, established in 1958 to support the nuclear sector, which became a strategic player in the development of nuclear submarine propulsion. Another notable example is Dassault, which pioneered the use of

computer-aided design and manufacturing (CAD/CAM) technologies in the 1970s. These innovations allowed for deeper integration between design and production, thereby enhancing both the autonomy and global competitiveness of the French defense industry (Bernard, 2024).

Therefore, based on de Gaulle's actions during his presidency, it is clear that the approach emphasizing national strategic autonomy best reflects his priority, confirming the position of scholars who argue this point within the academic debate. His reforms in defense organization, nuclear deterrence, and industrial policy all aimed to ensure that France alone held control over its security and destiny. Thus, in the early years of the Fifth Republic, the national model of autonomy clearly prevailed. However, from the late 1990s onward, as global markets and financial pressures intensified, this model faced new structural constraints. The next chapter examines how market dynamics and financialization reshaped the strategic landscape, compelling French presidents to rethink the Gaullist legacy, without ever abandoning its core ambition of national security and independence.

Chapter 3: Reinterpreting Gaullism in the Age of Financialization: A Franco-German Comparison

This third chapter addresses the second sub-question of the thesis: how has the Gaullist approach, which traditionally favored strong state control over the defense industry, been reinterpreted to confront the challenges brought about by market dynamics and financialization? As Chapter 1 showed, the academic literature is divided between those who see Gaullism as a resilient strategic culture and those who argue that structural pressures, such as globalization and European integration, have forced France to reinterpret autonomy beyond the national level. Authors like O'Brien and Williams (2024) highlight how financialization challenges traditional state-centered models by imposing market logics, while others, notably Hoffmann (2022), emphasize the geostrategic and geopolitical benefits derived from preserving

a state-centered model of defense industrial organization. This chapter tests these arguments by comparing how France and Germany have navigated financialization in the defense sector. The goal is to highlight how France has sought to adapt the Gaullist legacy to safeguard strategic interests and preserve a logic of autonomy, even within an increasingly market-driven environment. In contrast, the German defense industry has evolved under a more liberal framework, where market efficiency and competitiveness often take precedence over strategic sovereignty. This contrast captures the core tension between state-centered and market-oriented approaches. In this chapter, the case study demonstrates that this divergence between the French and German approaches creates significant obstacles to effective European defense cooperation. For those who adhere to a strict Gaullist line, this gap illustrates the incompatibility between Gaullism and an approach that prioritizes European integration in defense matters. However, for advocates of the European model, two possible interpretations emerge. The first would be to move away entirely from Gaullism and national independence, adopting a framework closer to the German model to facilitate cooperation between Europe's two largest economies. The second interpretation, more consistent with the Gaullist spirit, would be to advance European defense integration in a way that gradually aligns the German defense industry with the French model. Such an evolution would strengthen European cooperation while preserving Gaullism's core principles, sovereignty and independence, reimagined at the European level, without succumbing to market logic or external influence.

Since the end of the Cold War, European defense industries have undergone profound structural transformations¹. These changes have been driven by declining military budgets, waves of privatization, and a growing turn toward market-based logics. At the heart of this evolution lies a key concept in contemporary political economy: financialization. It is defined by the increasing dominance of financial motives, capital markets, and shareholder-value imperatives in economic and industrial decision-making (Labban, 2010, p.545). In a sector historically dominated by the state due to its strategic importance for national survival, this shift has created deep tensions between long-term security objectives and short-term financial performance pressures. This concept began emerging in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In her article, van der Zwan defines the term as a series of structural transformations of global political economies (2014, p. 101). According to her, financialization studies examine how an

¹ This analysis partly builds on another paper I wrote, titled *Financializing Security: How Market Logics Shape the Military-Industrial Complex in France and Germany*.

increasingly autonomous financial sector has reshaped the fundamental logic of industrial economies and the internal dynamics of democratic societies. This implies that private actors, markets, and financial logics are playing an increasingly central role in society and across economic sectors (French, Leyshon, & Wainwright, 2011). Nevertheless, although this phenomenon has expanded recently, it is important to note that the links between the productive economy and finance are not new. In fact, the links between various sectors and finance date back centuries, as seen in commodity exchanges (Clapp & Isakson, 2018). The defense sector is deeply affected by the ongoing development of financialization and must now adapt in order to evolve and remain competitive. Defense procurement is defined by O'Brien as the process through which states acquire military equipment and services (2024). This domain lies at a strategic intersection between political economy and national security. The modalities of acquisition and the structural organization of defense industries vary from country to country, depending on their level of industrialization and technological development.

To better understand how these interpretations materialize in practice, we will now examine how France and Germany have each adapted their defense industries to the pressures of market dynamics. Although both countries have been influenced by financial imperatives such as cost-efficiency and shareholder value, their responses diverge significantly. France has preserved a stronger tradition of state control, whereas Germany has undergone more profound market-driven restructuring. France and Germany are both relevant examples as they both have one of the greatest defense industries in Europe and these contrasting trajectories raise shared concerns about the long-term sustainability of strategic autonomy in Europe. Defense industries may be driven by private actors (as in the United States and the United Kingdom) or by state-owned enterprises (as in China and Russia) (O'Brien, 2024, p. 408). France has a hybrid model, combining strong state oversight with openness to private shareholders, making it an ideal case for this case study. Germany, for its part, is absent from these rankings due to political choices: its defense sector remains shaped by post-war pacifist norms and constitutional constraints, which limit the scale and ambition of its military-industrial policy, at least until recently. Nevertheless, it is home to numerous internationally recognized arms manufacturers.

To address this issue, the chapter compares two emblematic defense firms: Thales in France and Rheinmetall AG in Germany. These companies reflect two distinct models of industrial governance: Thales operates within a hybrid system, where the state retains

significant influence despite exposure to market dynamics, while Rheinmetall represents a fully liberalized model, with strong exposure to private investors and profit-driven restructuring. The aim is to analyse how financial logics are now shaping the organization, priorities, and strategic capacities of leading defense firms.

First, Thales is a French multinational company that specializes in aerospace, defense, security, and digital technologies, including AI and cybersecurity. This major player in the French defense industry clearly illustrates how financialization has altered industrial governance in this sector, without fully supplanting traditional state-led frameworks. Indeed, the company is publicly listed, with over a third of its capital held by private investors. However, the French state retains a strategic 36% stake through the Agence des Participations de l'État (APE), while Dassault Aviation (another French company) holds an additional 30%, enabling a form of public-private co-governance that limits Thales' full exposure to stock market dynamics (Share and Shareholding, 2024). It is nonetheless important to note that Dassault Aviation, a major player in the sector, is both publicly listed and controlled by the Dassault family. This dual structure reflects France's commitment to de Gaulle's doctrine of national strategic autonomy, in which a strong national defense industry is considered a pillar of national sovereignty (Lequesne & McKercher, 2022, p.82; Młynarski, 2024, p.225). The partial privatization of Thales has nevertheless introduced financial imperatives into its management. Economic indicators for 2024 reflect a growing alignment with market expectations: the company distributed €708 million in dividends and conducted €176 million in share buybacks, while reducing its net debt and strengthening its equity base (Thales Reports Its 2024 Full-Year Results, 2025). These financial decisions illustrate the impact of shareholders on the decision-making process of the firm. However, their demand for fiscal discipline might generate internal tensions, particularly between long-term industrial objectives, such as investments in cybersecurity or radar systems, and immediate profitability requirements. Despite this financial orientation, the influence of the French state remains a decisive influence in major strategic decisions, especially in sensitive domains such as air defense or European initiatives (Mackenzie, 2022). Thus, the case of Thales highlights a form of contained financialization, where market logics are acknowledged but remain subordinated to higher national security interests.

In contrast to the French model, Rheinmetall AG, Germany's leading manufacturer of land-based weaponry and the fifth-largest defense group in Europe, embodies an advanced form

of financialization in the German defense sector. Hence, the company's decision-making process is fully structured around shareholder value logics. The company is entirely private, publicly listed, and supported by powerful institutional investors such as BlackRock, Bank of America, Goldman Sachs, and other international funds, each holding around 5% of the capital (Financial Report for Q1 2025, 2025). Unlike Thales, Rheinmetall does not benefit from any significant public ownership and thus operates under a governance model entirely oriented toward shareholder profitability. This dispersed shareholder structure drives the company to prioritize financial performance over any broader strategic consideration aligned with the German state's interests. This is illustrated by its decision to gradually withdraw from civilian activities and focus exclusively on the defense sector. This explicit strategic shift responds to the growing demands for armaments and aims to enhance the company's appeal to investors (Matthias Inverardi, 2025). Economically, Rheinmetall recorded a 46% increase in revenue in the first quarter of 2025 compared to the previous year, with an order book reaching €63 billion (Financial Report for Q1 2025, 2025). These results reflect the success of a strategy based on aggressive expansion, cost reduction, and rapid adaptation to geopolitical demand, particularly in the context of the war in Ukraine and Germany's rearmament. Rheinmetall has also consolidated its position in Europe through targeted acquisitions, such as that of Expal Systems in Spain (Rheinmetall, 2023).

This shareholder-oriented model can be understood in light of Germany's post-war history and political culture. Unlike France, Germany doesn't have a strong tradition of centralized state planning in the defense sector (Fuder, 2016). After World War II, a pacifist mindset, institutionalized through constitutional constraints such as Article 26 of the Basic Law, long limited the role of the state in shaping defense industrial strategy (Federal Ministry of Justice, 2022). Over time, especially following the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, this hands-off approach was reinforced by the growing influence of global capital markets. As a result, companies like Rheinmetall have evolved in an environment where maximizing shareholder value became the dominant logic, largely independent of national strategic objectives. This historical context contributed to the absence of a strong public industrial base and paved the way for private actors to evolve under purely market-driven logics. Even today, in the current context of rearmament and heightened geopolitical tensions, the German government plays a reactive rather than directive role, leaving firms to shape their own priorities (Terhorst, 2025).

Therefore, this model further widens the strategic gap between the company and the German government. It raises questions about the long-term ability of national interest to play a guiding role in the development of cutting-edge military technologies in Germany and by extension, in Europe.

The comparison between Thales and Rheinmetall highlights two contrasting approaches to financialization, which reflect deeper differences in national models of industrial governance and defense policy. Thales embodies a hybrid regime in which financial markets play a growing but contained role, under the influence of strong state control. On the contrary, Rheinmetall represents a fully financialized model, where shareholder value and stock market performance dictate strategic choices.

Thus, the advocates of European strategic autonomy justify this evolution by arguing that budgetary constraints and the increasing technological complexity of weapons have prompted the French military to strongly support deeper cooperation with private actors and European counterparts, encouraging specialization and the pooling of capabilities (Mérand, 2003). European initiatives such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the Strategic Compass align with this logic of resource mutualization, although their effectiveness remains uneven, often hindered by cultural and strategic divergences, notably between France and Germany (Deschaux-Dutard, 2022, p.598-599). One of the clearest examples of these differences is Rheinmetall, whose strategic decisions are strongly influenced by institutional investors like BlackRock and Goldman Sachs, making financial interests more important than national or European security priorities. This raises important questions about the extent of foreign investor control over key defense actors, and whether these external investors could become a threat for German sovereignty and, by extension, to European sovereignty. Indeed, financial logics have to be taken into account when we talk about international security, as potential risks of foreign interference must be pointed out while talking about financialization. In moments of crisis, companies operating under state direction like Thales can quickly and easily align their operations with national and European defense priorities. Rheinmetall, on the other hand, is primarily accountable to its shareholders, which may delay its ability or willingness to respond to state or European demands.

These asymmetries raise concerns about growing strategic fragmentation in Europe. A clear illustration of these difficulties is the Future Combat Air System (FCAS), Europe's

ambitious program to develop a sixth-generation fighter jet alongside drones and AI-powered command systems. However, this program has been plagued by internal disputes among its main partners, as France, Germany and Spain clash over control of the jet's design and key technologies (Mackenzie, 2022). Although officially supported by the governments of all three countries, the initiative, which will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 4, faces major challenges in terms of collaboration, governance, and decision-making. Moreover, these two models (French and German) reflect different political and economic philosophies among the European countries. France sees defense as a matter of national sovereignty, advocating for strategic autonomy and stronger state involvement. Germany, on the contrary, leans toward a market-driven model that opens its defense sector to private and international investors. These differences make it harder for the European countries to agree on a shared defense strategy. Without convergence between these two approaches, financialization may continue to undermine Europe's ambitions for a strong European strategic autonomy (Deschaux-Dutard, 2022). In the long run, the European defense sector risks being pulled between two poles: on one side, national sovereignty; on the other, financial globalization, unless a new balance is reinvented. Therefore, the defenders of national strategic autonomy argue that such divergences undermine Europe's ability to act as a coherent geopolitical actor. For them, maintaining a strong degree of state control over defense industries is essential to preserve decision-making independence and prevent external financial or political interference. In this perspective, financialization is seen not as a driver of efficiency, but as a potential threat to sovereignty, one that risks subordinating strategic imperatives to market logics.

The comparative study of Thales and Rheinmetall reveals two distinct paths in the face of financialization. While both France and Germany have been influenced by financial imperatives such as cost-efficiency and shareholder value, their responses diverge sharply. France has maintained a hybrid system in which the state remains a central actor in strategic decisions, allowing for a balance between market competitiveness and national sovereignty. Germany, by contrast, has embraced a more liberalized model where corporate governance and shareholder value dominate, often at the expense of strategic autonomy. This divergence underscores a broader tension within Europe between state-centered and market-oriented approaches to defense governance. Thales demonstrates that it is still possible to integrate financial imperatives without fully relinquishing political control. It can be understood as an

evolution of the Gaullist legacy that adapts to market pressures while safeguarding national interests. Rheinmetall, on the other hand, illustrates the risks of excessive market dependence, as foreign investors and financial actors increasingly shape its strategic orientation.

Thus, as previously discussed, the European approach examined in this thesis does not seek to reject Gaullism, but rather to extend and apply its principles at the European level. However, the growing influence of markets and financialization, exemplified by the German model, makes it increasingly difficult to safeguard national interests. Considering these findings, France appears to offer a more sustainable model for reconciling economic transformation with the preservation of sovereignty, thereby proving the scholars who view Gaullism as a national doctrine of strategic autonomy right. France's ability to reinterpret Gaullist principles, emphasizing autonomy, strategic control, and selective European cooperation, provides a viable framework for addressing the challenges of financialization without undermining strategic independence. Ultimately, this suggests that a European defense identity built on a reimagined Gaullist foundation may offer the most coherent path toward both national and collective resilience. In this sense, a strictly national approach may ensure a certain degree of short-term security. However, to preserve and project Gaullist ideals, it would be preferable to diffuse them at the European level, thereby strengthening collective autonomy without jeopardizing national sovereignty, while remaining cautious about the uncertain durability of European autonomy itself. Thus, this chapter also opens the door to a more European-oriented interpretation of Gaullism, aligning with scholars who argue that Gaullist principles can be meaningfully extended and applied at the European level.

Chapter 4: War, Autonomy, and Integration: Reassessing Gaullism After the Invasion of Ukraine

This chapter addresses the third sub-question of the thesis by examining how the war in Ukraine, have put the Gaullist approach to the test, forcing it to balance national independence with deeper European cooperation. The academic debate offers two contrasting interpretations of French strategic autonomy: one emphasizing the enduring influence of Gaullism, and another arguing for its progressive integration into a European framework. Scholars like Tardy (2018) and Bozo (2016) point out that Gaullism always envisaged a form of European cooperation, while others such as Deschaux-Dutard (2022) highlight persistent limits to integration rooted in national strategic cultures. This chapter evaluates these competing perspectives by examining France's response to the war in Ukraine since 2022. The aim of this chapter is to assess whether the unexpected return of high-intensity conflict in Europe has revived traditional state-centered approaches to defense, associated with the national Gaullist tradition, or whether it supports the position of scholars who contend that strategic autonomy increasingly depends on collective European instruments and cooperative defense structures. To do so, this chapter analyzes the French and European responses to the invasion of Ukraine since 2022. This conflict offers a valuable opportunity to test the resilience of the Gaullist model of national strategic autonomy. The return of large-scale war in Europe has intensified the urgency and scale of defense efforts, compelling France's defense sector and policymakers to respond, but also raising doubts about whether true strategic autonomy can still be achieved at the national level within an increasingly integrated Europe. This crisis thus serves as a revealing case study: it exposes, more than ever, the material and human resource limits already acknowledged by de Gaulle in 1965 (see Chapter 2), while suggesting that autonomy may now depend on deeper European industrial and defense cooperation. Due to space constraints, this analysis will remain focused on some of the most significant developments.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shattered the long-held post-Cold War assumption of a peaceful and stable Europe. For decades, many European states had operated under a "post-war peace illusion," assuming that large-scale conflict on the continent was unlikely and that defense burdens could continue to be modest (Caloud, 2025). The Russian aggression acted as a strategic shock that revived deep-seated questions about Europe's security

architecture, defense spending, industrial capacity, and strategic autonomy. In response to the crisis, major European powers announced ambitious rearmament programs and industrial mobilization. France's 2024-2030 *Loi de Programmation Militaire* (Military Programming Act) commits roughly €413 billion to military budget, bringing defense spending to 2% of the national wealth from 2025 onwards. It explicitly aims to protect French sovereignty through heightened military investment and defense industrial capacity (Ministère des Armées et des Anciens Combattants, 2023). At the same time, Germany responded in February 2022 with Chancellor Olaf Scholz's landmark "Zeitenwende" address, establishing a special fund of €100 billion and committing to raise defense spending above 2 % of the German gross domestic product (GDP), marking a profound shift in its security and industrial posture (Scholz, 2022). Overall, European states have significantly increased their defense spending since 2022, reversing decades of underinvestment. As highlighted by the French think tank IRIS, the war in Ukraine has compelled European Union (EU) member states to prioritize military expenditure despite economic pressures. This shift reflects not only the perception of a renewed Russian threat but also the growing expectation that Europe must assume greater responsibility for its own security. Investments now focus on strengthening defense industries, improving production capacities, and enhancing strategic autonomy in line with NATO objectives (Diacre, Laroche, Pelpel, & IRIS Defense Research Team, 2025).

The war in Ukraine has profoundly reshaped French strategic thinking and the conception of what it means to "defend France and French interests." Before 2022, official doctrine, as expressed in the *Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale* (2013), outlined a clear hierarchy of priorities: first, the protection of French territory and citizens; second, the defense of Europe and the North Atlantic space "*in cooperation with our European and allied partners*"; and third, the stabilization of Europe's periphery, from the eastern neighborhood to the Mediterranean and Africa (Ministère de la Défense, 2013). The *Livre blanc sur la défense et la sécurité nationale* is France's official strategic blueprint, outlining the country's defense priorities, security objectives, and the guiding principles shaping its military and industrial policy. This framework reflected a Gaullist logic: France's security was inseparable from its sovereignty, but still compatible with selective partnerships, as long as ultimate decision-making authority remained in national hands. Therefore, the defense industry stands as one of

the most concrete manifestations of this legacy, embodying the conviction that industrial sovereignty is the essential foundation of strategic independence.

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine compelled France to reconsider the geographic and political boundaries of its “vital interests” and to engage more directly in the defense of Europe’s eastern flank, an area previously seen as peripheral to French strategic priorities. This evolution marks a subtle but important European shift in French strategic thinking. As Lequesne and McKercher (2022) argue, France’s identity as a “middle power with global ambitions” has always required balancing its limited material means with expansive political aspirations. The war in Ukraine pushed France to act both as a sovereign military power and as a key European security provider. Paris has supplied Kyiv with advanced systems such as Caesar howitzers (Reuters, 2024) and long-range cruise missiles (Reuters, 2023), yet it has carefully avoided any step that would compromise national control over escalation. In this context, the French defense industry continues to act as a key vector of autonomy, ensuring that national decision-making is not constrained by foreign suppliers or alliances.

This tension is best illustrated in the debate surrounding France’s nuclear deterrent, the cornerstone of its defense industry, which highlights the balance between national sovereignty and collective security. Following Germany’s proposal in February 2025 to explore the idea of a shared European nuclear umbrella (Le Monde; 2025), President Macron acknowledged the strategic logic of such discussions but reaffirmed the strictly national character of France’s deterrent. As Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu stated, “*the nuclear deterrent “is French and will remain French—from its conception to its production to its operation—under a decision of the President”*” (BBC, 2025). Historically, this position is not new, and it echoes Charles de Gaulle’s own doctrine, articulated in his 1965 speech, which implied that defending France’s strategic interests also meant defending those of its European neighbors, while remaining deliberately vague, as strategic interests have always been defined. This growing German interest in French or British nuclear guarantees also reflects growing doubts about the reliability of the U.S. nuclear umbrella (BBC, 2024). Yet Macron’s cautious response underscores the continuity of Gaullist reasoning: cooperation may be European, but sovereignty in ultimate decision-making remains national.

In this sense, France’s response to the war in Ukraine embodies both continuity and adaptation. The crisis has encouraged greater coordination with European partners and a widening definition of strategic interests, but without undermining the central Gaullist principle

that autonomy, whether political, industrial, or nuclear, remains the ultimate guarantor of national security. Therefore, the defense industry occupies a central place within this framework, serving as both the instrument and symbol of France's sovereign capacity to act independently. Maintaining national control over defense production thus continues to embody the practical expression of Gaullist autonomy.

France's response to the war in Ukraine can therefore be interpreted as a reaffirmation of its enduring Gaullist defense doctrine. The ideal of national power remains deeply rooted in France's political culture and continues to shape its contemporary leadership discourse on defense. Two former French prime ministers, Édouard Philippe and Dominique de Villepin, have recently articulated this enduring vision of autonomy and national distinctiveness in their respective books, both of which reaffirm France's aspiration for independence and global influence. In his book titled *Le prix de nos mensonges* (2025), Philippe emphasizes the need to preserve France's sovereignty and strategic independence; and enduring ambition for power as the foundation of its international influence. Similarly, in *Le Pouvoir de dire non* (2025), de Villepin argues that France must chart its own course, offering an alternative to the competing empires of the USA and China. His critique of a world divided between great powers strongly echoes Charles de Gaulle's 1965 speech, in which he condemned the bipolar logic of the Cold War and defended the necessity of an independent French path. This continuity of thought illustrates how Gaullism remains a central reference in French strategic and political debates, even in the post-Ukraine context. The same logic is visible in the *2024-2030 Loi de Programmation Militaire*, which significantly increased defense spending to modernize the armed forces. The LPM explicitly aims to strengthen France's strategic autonomy by ensuring that its military capabilities and industrial base remain nationally controlled. This approach once again demonstrates that for France, defense policy is inseparable from industrial policy: maintaining a strong, independent defense industry is seen as a prerequisite for national sovereignty. In this sense, both contemporary political discourse and concrete policy choices reaffirm that the Gaullist ambition to ensure France's freedom of action and resist dependence on external powers continues to shape the country's defense strategy in the twenty-first century.

To better understand how Gaullist principles continue to shape France's strategic outlook, this section examines President Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech on Europe delivered on April 24, 2024, which provides valuable insight into how these principles are being

reinterpreted in today's geopolitical context. Speaking at a moment of renewed geopolitical tension, Macron described a world marked by what he called a "*generalized rearmament of the world*," where Europe must now confront the end of post-war complacency. He celebrated Europe's initial unity in responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, presenting it as a success of European solidarity. However, he immediately added that this awakening remains "*too slow and too weak*," warning that Europe still falls short in terms of defense preparedness. He explains that France has "*doubled its defense budget*" under a new Military Programming Law, but this national effort must be matched by a collective European one.

Overall, Macron's argument is nuanced. His call for a credible European defense aligns with the logic of deeper European integration. He insists that "*Europe must be able to defend what it holds dear, with its allies when they are ready to stand beside us, and alone if necessary.*" This formulation strongly echoes de Gaulle's 1965 doctrine: France must be capable of acting alone when required but will always favor cooperation when possible. Macron also insists on France's "*complete army model*" and its nuclear deterrent, which he positions at the heart of French defense strategy and therefore as an essential pillar of Europe's defense. It demonstrates how Macron conceives France's strategic assets as both national instruments and European guarantees. By positioning the French nuclear force as a potential pillar of continental security, he suggests a gradual European extension of Gaullist principles: national autonomy preserved but shared with European allies. Macron's vision also has a distinctly industrial dimension. "*There is no defense without a defense industry*", highlighting the urgent need to shift from emergency aid to Ukraine into sustained industrial effort. He argues that decades of underinvestment have left Europe dangerously dependent on non-European suppliers, particularly the USA. Hence his plea for a "*European preference*" in military procurement, to "*produce faster, more, and more as Europeans.*" Macron further highlights Europe's enduring fragmentation in the defense sector, arguing that divided industrial efforts weakened its collective strength and strategic credibility. Therefore, he argues that rebuilding Europe's defense industry is not just an economic necessity but a strategic imperative. He called for greater European Investment Bank support, joint funding mechanisms, and industrial standardization to create "*European champions*" capable of competing globally. This reasoning marks a significant evolution of Gaullism: from national to collective European sovereignty. While remaining faithful to the principle of autonomy, Macron reframes it within a European framework, one that seeks to reconcile strategic independence with industrial interdependence.

For scholars emphasizing European integration, this moment represents not the abandonment of Gaullism, but its transformation, as it can be seen as a deliberate European integration of the Gaullist ideal under contemporary conditions of shared security and economic globalization.

This renewed strategic vision is reinforced by several major European initiatives that aim to translate political ambition into concrete industrial capacity. Chief among them is the European Defense Fund (EDF), the European Commission's flagship instrument to support research and development in the defense sector. With a budget of nearly €7.3 billion for 2021–2027, the EDF seeks to foster cross-border cooperation among European defense companies, research institutions, and enterprises. Its objectives are threefold: to stimulate collaborative innovation, to strengthen Europe's defense capability development, and to help European firms design interoperable, next-generation technologies and equipment (European Commission, 2025). By encouraging joint projects that complement national programs, the EDF represents a key step toward reducing Europe's dependence on non-European suppliers, a long-standing Gaullist concern now framed within a collective European context. A second European initiative is the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) instrument, adopted by the Council of the European Union in May 2025. SAFE provides up to €150 billion in long-term, low-interest loans to EU member states wishing to invest jointly in defense industrial production (Council of the European Union, 2025). This financial instrument reflects the growing recognition that Europe must move from fragmented national efforts to coordinated industrial planning, a logic that echoes de Gaulle's insistence on aligning production with strategic autonomy, though now reinterpreted at the continental level. Overall, the EU has launched many complementary initiatives in response to the war in Ukraine, illustrating a clear acceleration of defense integration across multiple dimensions. Instruments such as the European Peace Facility (EPF), which has financed joint procurement of ammunition and missiles for Ukraine (Council of the European Union, 2023), and several programs coordinated by the European Defense Agency (EDA) demonstrate this growing collective effort (European Defense Agency, 2025). These initiatives cannot all be detailed here, but together they mark a significant shift from rhetorical commitments to practical cooperation and industrial consolidation, signaling the gradual institutionalization of a truly European approach to strategic autonomy.

Finally, a more speculative but significant development concerns the debate surrounding France's nuclear umbrella. Macron's suggestion that France's nuclear deterrent could serve as a pillar of European security may also have far-reaching implications for the French defense

industry. Over time, such a shift could reshape European defense procurement priorities, especially if a European nuclear framework were to reduce dependence on U.S.-compatible weapons systems. In that scenario, European states might increasingly turn to French-made equipment, designed to be interoperable with France's nuclear capabilities, much as they previously aligned with U.S. standards under the American deterrent. In this context, Macron's call for a "*European preference*" in defense procurement would not only strengthen Europe's industrial base but also consolidate France's central role within it, extending the Gaullist logic of autonomy from the national to the continental level.

However, while Macron appears willing to adapt France's defense industry to achieve greater European integration, the Gaullist approach that has shaped French defense industrial policy for more than fifty years remains far from universally accepted among France's European partners. Indeed, this unwavering prioritization of national independence is often perceived by some allies as a refusal to cooperate and as an obstacle to deeper European integration. A recent example came in October 2025, when the Belgian Minister of Defense openly criticized the French defense industry. He justified Belgium's decision to purchase American F-35s instead of French Rafale fighter jet by stating: "*At this factory, Lockheed Martin completes fifteen F-35s per month. [...] that's equivalent to the entire annual production of France's Rafale.*" He further added that "*Industrially speaking, the F-35 could be called even more European than the Rafale, which is simply a French product.*" According to him, "*Only one European country refuses to engage in multinational cooperation with the American defense industry: France. Like a Gallic village surrounded by angry Romans, it seeks national autonomy in defense production. The result of this technological isolationism? More expensive, inferior weapons systems that are harder to integrate with those of European allies*" (Lemaitre, 2025). For the record, it is worth noting that of the four F-35s expected to arrive in October 2025 as part of a larger order of thirty-four American aircraft, only three actually landed at Belgium's Florennes air base. The fourth remained grounded at an air base in the Azores after a technical malfunction during its stopover (Bosredon, 2025).

These criticisms find an even more symbolic illustration in the FCAS (Future Combat Air System) project. This ambitious Franco-German-Spanish program intended to develop Europe's sixth-generation fighter jet alongside drones and AI-powered command systems. Far from embodying seamless cooperation, the program has repeatedly revealed the structural

tensions that complicate European defense integration. Disputes over industrial leadership and disagreements regarding the sharing of intellectual property have slowed progress and revealed competing national priorities. France, through Dassault, the manufacturer of the Rafale, emphasizes its technical know-how and industrial experience to justify its intention to lead the program. Germany and Spain, represented by Airbus, demand a more balanced distribution of tasks, which would require Dassault to share some of its patents with its partners (Malo, 2025). This dynamic clearly reflects the enduring Gaullist influence that prioritizes French autonomy. Dassault maintains that it could develop the new fighter without its European partners, revealing a reluctance to relinquish any part of its strategic autonomy to a broader European framework. The result is a program that advances only through fragile compromises and recurring political intervention. The FCAS has thus become more than an industrial project: it is a barometer of Europe's ability to reconcile national strategic autonomy with multinational cooperation, and a striking reminder of the limits of aligning national defense industries under a common European framework.

Taken together, these developments show that while the war in Ukraine has undeniably revitalized defense cooperation in Europe, it has also exposed deep and persistent strategic divergences between visions of sovereignty, industrial priorities, and the very meaning of strategic autonomy among European partners. Therefore, France's post-2022 defense trajectory suggests that the Gaullist model remains the dominant framework shaping French strategic choices. Yet this Gaullism is no longer exclusively national. The war in Ukraine served as a reminder that France cannot confront large-scale, high-intensity conflict alone, echoing de Gaulle's own 1965 acknowledgment of the country's structural limits. In this new environment, strategic autonomy cannot mean isolation; it must instead be projected through Europe. The EU's rapid and unified response to the invasion demonstrated that European countries are capable of speaking with one voice when confronted with a major strategic shock. Although significant divisions persist, especially in defense industrial cooperation, the crisis has shown that collective action is both possible and necessary.

However, even if these arguments align with the scholars who advocate for a European adaptation of Gaullism, they also highlight its significant limitations. Therefore, in the short term, the evidence also supports the scholars who defend the Gaullist model of national strategic independence. However, given the speed at which European coordination has accelerated since 2022, this academic debate is likely to evolve in the coming years. Therefore, the more

persuasive approach is the one that understands Gaullism not as an exclusively national doctrine, but as a framework that is progressively adapting to partially rely on European mechanisms to safeguard sovereignty. France's challenge is therefore not to abandon national Gaullism, but to extend it to the European level, strengthening collective autonomy while remaining faithful to the principles of national leadership and strategic independence that have defined French defense policy for decades.

Conclusion

This thesis is anchored in a long-standing academic debate between those who argue that Gaullism remains the defining logic of French strategic behavior and those who contend that European integration now offers a more accurate framework for understanding France's defense choices. Building on this debate, the study addresses a central and timely research question: to what extent does Gaullism still shape the French defense industry in the contemporary strategic environment, and how is this legacy being challenged, adapted, or reinforced by the pressures of European integration.

Through three chronological and complementary case studies, each capturing a pivotal stage in the evolution of Gaullist strategic thinking, the study has provided a multi-layered analysis showing that Gaullism has neither disappeared nor remained static. Instead, it has evolved into a hybrid doctrine: still fundamentally centered on national autonomy and independence yet increasingly embedded within a European strategic framework. By testing the competing claims of the two scholarly perspectives across these empirical cases, the thesis demonstrates how elements of both interpretations coexist, even if the national Gaullist reading retains greater explanatory power. This conclusion synthesizes these sub-questions to demonstrate how they collectively support the academic debate and the main research question.

It also offers policy recommendations intended to guide decision-makers navigating the tension between national sovereignty and European integration in the French defense industry.

The first case study revisited Charles de Gaulle's 1965 speech, arguably the purest articulation of Gaullist strategic thinking and foreign policy. It provided a conceptual anchor against which later developments could be evaluated. De Gaulle articulated a worldview built on national sovereignty, strategic autonomy grounded in a state-centered defense industry, and the refusal of subordination to any hegemonic power. European cooperation was not rejected but explicitly framed as possible only if it did not undermine national freedom of action. In light of this case study, the balance of evidence clearly favors the scholars who argue that Gaullism remains the dominant framework shaping French strategic thinking. The enduring centrality of sovereignty, national control, and independent decision-making demonstrates that, Gaullist interpretation of autonomy continues to prevail. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrated that Gaullism is not simply a Cold War doctrine but a long-term strategic culture that shapes French defense institutions, industrial policies, and political narratives. Its legacy remains visible today, underscoring the enduring influence of this doctrine, as modern French defense policy still reflects De Gaulle's insistence on a France capable of acting alone, if necessary, with allies when possible.

The second sub-question examined how global financialization has reshaped defense industries in Europe and whether this transformation challenged or reinforced Gaullist logic. By comparing France's state-anchored hybrid industrial model, which reveals the institutional continuity of French industrial sovereignty, with Germany's market-driven model characterized by a relative indifference toward maintaining national strategic autonomy, the chapter highlighted the structural persistence of Gaullist industrial policy. This analysis demonstrated that France continues to view defense industrial capacity as a core attribute of sovereignty. This case study therefore provided partial confirmation of the research question and the academic debate: Gaullism still shapes the institutional framework and strategic logic guiding French defense procurement and industrial governance. Thus, these findings clearly strengthen the arguments of scholars who defend a national, state-centered interpretation of Gaullism. However, the comparison also revealed some limitations of a purely national model within an increasingly integrated European defense market. The asymmetries between Europe's two leading industrial powers, France and Germany, raise concerns about weakened strategic cohesion and the risk of deepening fragmentation across the continent. Therefore, the evidence

still leans in favor of the scholars who argue that Gaullism continues to operate primarily as a national doctrine of strategic autonomy.

Finally, the third sub-question offered the strongest test of the resilience of Gaullist strategic autonomy. The 2022 invasion of Ukraine by Russia fundamentally reshaped Europe's defense landscape, prompting a surge in defense spending, industrial mobilization, and unprecedented levels of EU-level coordination. In this context, France reaffirmed the priority of national sovereignty, industrial capacity, and nuclear deterrence. However, simultaneously, it supported major European initiatives aimed at strengthening a shared European defense architecture. This dual evolution demonstrates a strong reassertion of national sovereignty, confirming the position of scholars who interpret Gaullism as a predominantly national doctrine centered on sovereign control. At the same time, France's parallel commitment to joint EU-level capability building lends credibility to those scholars who argue that Gaullism can be adapted, expanded, and projected at the European scale. Macron's 2024 Sorbonne speech captures this synthesis: France should cooperate with allies when possible, yet retain the capacity to act alone when necessary, an unmistakable European translation of De Gaulle's original formulation. To summarize, the conflict in Ukraine revealed that Gaullism remains the central doctrine of France's defense-industrial strategy, while being progressively extended to the European level by President Macron.

Bringing together the three case studies provides a clear answer to the research question and to the academic debate. Taken as a whole, the findings show that the Gaullist tradition anchored in national autonomy remains a central driver in shaping French defense policy. Neither financialization nor industrial or economic pressures have dismantled the sovereign model that France built in the beginning of the Fifth Republic; instead, they have compelled it to evolve. The war in Ukraine has significantly strengthened the belief that a meaningful European strategic autonomy is achievable, giving rise to a hybrid doctrine in which national sovereignty, particularly in the defense-industrial domain, is increasingly exercised through European framework. This shift has had a profound impact on the defense industry, long considered the backbone of France's military and strategic independence, which now plays a dual role: sustaining national autonomy while contributing to Europe's developing industrial base.

Therefore, the academic debate does not yield a single, absolute winner, but it does clearly point to an asymmetry. In the short term, the scholars who argue that Gaullism remains

fundamentally a national doctrine of strategic autonomy are the ones best supported by the evidence. From 1959 until now, France's defense-industrial policies strongly validate this position. Yet, the debate cannot end there. The rapid European reactions to the Ukraine war, combined with the emerging development of a form of European strategic autonomy, point to a complementary trend: Gaullist principles are beginning to expand beyond the national level without requiring France to surrender sovereign decision-making. This suggests a gradual evolution toward a Europeanized form of Gaullism, one in which national autonomy remains intact, but is reinforced, amplified, and projected through European frameworks. Thus, the short-term "winner" of the academic debate is the national-sovereigntist interpretation of Gaullism, but the long-term trajectory hints at a convergence: Gaullism may increasingly serve as the intellectual foundation for a European strategic autonomy that preserves, rather than replaces, national sovereignty. In this sense, the influence of Gaullism on France's defense industry not only endures but increasingly adapts itself to the European context. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that Gaullism is not a rigid doctrine of the past, but a flexible strategic culture capable of transformation and expansion.

That said, several limitations should be recognized. First, the analysis relies on three case studies, which, although complementary, cannot fully capture the full complexity of French defense dynamics. A broader range of empirical cases, such as comparative studies with other European states, could have strengthened these findings. Second, some conclusions depend on rapidly evolving geopolitical events, particularly the war in Ukraine and European defense initiatives; future developments may confirm, nuance, or challenge the patterns identified here. Finally, limited access to classified or industry-confidential data inherently restricts the depth of analysis on procurement decisions and industrial strategy. These limits should guide future research but do not diminish the broader validity of the findings.

This thesis suggests several implications for policymakers navigating the tension between national sovereignty and European integration in the defense sector. First, Europe must reduce its industrial fragmentation. The war in Ukraine exposed the operational limits of incompatible systems, making greater standardization of ammunition, missile systems, and production chains essential. Strengthening interoperability would enhance sovereignty by improving efficiency and reducing dependence on non-European suppliers. These efforts should also extend beyond the EU to key European partners such as the United Kingdom and

Norway. Second, Franco-German cooperation must be recalibrated. As Europe's two leading industrial powers, they must overcome persistent divergences, illustrated by the difficulties of the FCAS program. Achieving this cooperation requires compromises from both sides, which inevitably challenges the Gaullist instinct to place national interests first. Yet if Gaullism is understood as one that can be elevated to the European level, such compromise becomes compatible with a reinterpreted vision of sovereignty. Finally, France should position its defense industry as a continental asset by expanding production capacity, deepening co-production with European partners, and ensuring that national investments align with EU initiatives. This would allow France to leverage its industrial strengths while supporting Europe's broader move toward greater strategic autonomy.

Ultimately, the success of Europe's credibility as a security actor depends on the ability of its member-states to cooperate to produce, innovate, and sustain military capabilities over time. The war in Ukraine has shown that industrial sovereignty is essential to Europe's ability to sustain long-term defense efforts. It has also underscored the need for a coherent European strategic culture capable of deterring threats without relying almost entirely on the United States. At the same time, Europe has begun to emerge as a genuine security actor, equipped with its own instruments, funding mechanisms, and shared strategic ambitions. In a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, embedding Gaullist principles within this European framework offers a pragmatic path forward: one that maintains the essential features of national sovereignty while enhancing the collective strength of the continent. Such an approach would allow Europe to act with unity and purpose, without requiring France to abandon the strategic logic that has guided its defense policy since the founding of the Fifth Republic.

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