Institutional Constraints on Policy Adaptation

The final section seeks to explain why it was that France proved unable to adapt its NATO policies in line with the increasingly apparent requirements of the time. It does so by highlighting a number of domestic constraints that prevented successive political leaders from acting decisively, despite their increasingly apparent recognition that action was necessary.

This chapter examines the constraints within the French policy-making system that hampered attempted adaptation. A first section outlines the development of the policy-making system of the Fifth Republic, illustrating how certain actors came to wield considerable influence over policy outcomes. The second examines the pressures on policy-makers after 1981 and considers the extent to which these affected three central elements of France’s relations with its allies: relations with NATO per se; defence funding and, finally, operational matters concerning military structures and strategy. Much recent literature has exaggerated the role of vested interests – and particularly of the armed forces – in shaping policy outcomes in France. In contrast with many such works, this chapter does not dispute the fact that the President of the Republic enjoyed ultimate control over Alliance policy during the 1980s and 1990s. What it does argue, however, is that certain actors succeeded, on certain occasions, in shaping policies in ways which did not necessarily reflect the policy preferences of the President. In the case of defence policy in particular, it was often such pressures which accounted for the choices which, as the foregoing chapters have illustrated, spawned such deleterious consequences.
Policy-making, 1958–81

The constitutional and legal provisions of the Fifth Republic governing executive authority over defence policy are vague. Over time, these texts have been refined and amended, without laying to rest the fundamental ambiguity concerning the attribution of powers between the two executive branches – President and Prime Minister. Vague constitutional stipulations were clarified by political practice between 1958 and 1981, practice which, whilst perhaps not conforming to the letter of the Constitution, certainly shaped interpretations of its provisions.

One of the de Gaulle’s intentions in pursuing his foreign policy had been to transfer to the state those functions which had ‘in effect fallen traditionally to various vested interests . . . to the benefit of those vested interests and to the detriment of the national interest’. He was therefore determined to ensure that the President was placed in charge of foreign and defence policies. This was in fact an aspiration he shared with his immediate successors. Consequently, under de Gaulle, Pompidou and Giscard d’Estaing, the dominance of the Presidency over foreign and particularly defence affairs was established and reinforced.

On the one hand, this process entailed attempts by successive incumbents of the Élysée to enshrine presidential supremacy in law. The constitutional amendment of 6 November 1962, allowing for the direct election of the President, was introduced in part because of a recognition that the responsibilities associated with nuclear status necessitated a reinforcement of presidential prerogatives in this sphere. Subsequently, the decree of 14 January 1964 empowered the President of the Republic alone to decide on the engagement of the Force Aérienne Stratégique. In January 1978, a further decree stipulated that the Secrétariat Général de la Défense Nationale (SGDN) – previously placed at the sole disposal of the Prime Minister – would in future come under the authority of both branches of the political executive. Certainly, none of these measures served entirely to remove the ambiguity that shrouded the question of executive competence over defence. The 1964 decree actually heightened it, providing for presidential control over the air-launched strategic component of the French nuclear arsenal (soon to become its least significant), while control over the other components of France’s nuclear triad remained constitutionally ill-defined. For all