

The French nuclear ‘disuader’

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Details of French military strategy are contained in a Defense Ministry document entitled the "White Book" (le Livre Blanc). The most recent White Book dates from 1994. It states, "France has no declared adversary" and emphasizes, "the importance of the modernization of conventional and nuclear forces." It elaborates, very discreetly: "With the nuclear option, the autonomy of Europe in defense matters is possible. Without it, autonomy is excluded." Recently, the defense ministry published a document entitled "French Defense Strategy" which completes the strategy set forth in the White Book.

This document states that, "France assigns itself a demanding ambition, in Europe but also in the world to respond to different international threats." Its defense policy is inscribed "in a perspective of the choices fashioned by its history and its rank as a major power. It must assume its role as a member of the security council and a nuclear power." The action of France on the international scene is thus going to be guided not only by principals of action, but also by its military capabilities.

The principal actions of France can be grouped under the notion of defense diplomacy. This notion covers in particular, "the promotion of a strong policy of mastery of weapons all over the world," measures of confidence, and the battle against weapons of mass destruction. Globally "the vision of France in terms of international security rests on the respect of law" and the "refusal to see every concept of legitimate preventive defense or of reprisals applied in a universal manner."

French defense policy is essentially based on its nuclear arsenal (stockpile of 348 operational nuclear warheads, delivery by four strategic submarines, carrier-based strike aircraft and land-based bombers). At the same time, France denounces the risk tied "to arms of massive destruction and the pursuit of cooperation between nations in regard to ballistics and nuclear technology." French nuclear strategy and its operational capacities are little discussed, like the idea of an extension of French nuclear "dissuasion" to the European Union.

The earlier controversy over the possible extension of the French nuclear "umbrella" to European partners is advanced discreetly as "nuclear dissuasion should potentially be able to contribute to the security of Europe in taking account of the growing solidarity among the countries in the Union."

However, despite this seeming prudence on the part of the Defense Ministry, this subject has been commented on frequently in the past by the highest authorities in the French State:

- Declaration of President Francois Mitterrand during the French-British summit of Chartres (18 November 1994). "Nuclear dissuasion is the basis of a policy of European security. A policy of European security without nuclear dissuasion would be a major weakness."
- Speech given at the Ecole militaire 23 February 1996 by Prime Minister Alain Juppé: "Our dissuasion, which already contributes to the general dissuasion of the Atlantic Alliance, is called to take on an increased European dimension. The overlapping of vital interests between European nations, the common character of many threats to which they could be exposed have led France to launch the idea of concerted dissuasion."

The defense strategy of France appears to be based on an ambiguity: France states it wants to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in order to reach stable international security; and at the same time it wants to preserve and develop a modern nuclear arsenal (the M51 SLBM with a new nuclear warheads, ASPM-A cruise missile and Rafale nuclear-capable strike aircraft) to protect its territory and the European Union.

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