

**THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL
OF THE UNITED STATES**

**French Nuclear Weapons Policy
After the Cold War**

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Pascal Boniface

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OF THE UNITED STATES

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French Nuclear Weapons Policy After the Cold War

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

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THE ATLANTIC COUNCIL OF THE UNITED STATES

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CONTENTS

<i>Foreword by Andrew J. Goodpaster</i>	v
<i>Executive Summary</i>	vii
French Nuclear Forces	1
Key Elements of French Nuclear Policy... ..	3
<i>Dissuasion</i>	3
No Nuclear Warfighting.....	6
Nuclear Weapons and European Defense	8
Nuclear Disarmament.....	12
Nuclear Weapons & French Politics.....	14
Adapting to a New Environment	15
Conclusions.....	18
<i>Glossary</i>	23
<i>About the Author</i>	24
<i>The “Further Reins on Nuclear Arms” Project</i>	25
<i>Atlantic Council Publications</i>	27



FOREWORD

France has been a bellwether of both popular and strategic thinking about nuclear weapons. The French combination of an open, pluralistic society with an independent nuclear force provides useful insights into the ways in which competing ideas and pressures can play out. Initially, President de Gaulle established an independent nuclear capability never integrated with NATO policies and plans. Moreover, France never sought to engage in the nuclear forces competition between the Soviet Union and the United States. Nevertheless, sophisticated debates over doctrine, strategy and force posture followed, together with political pressures from time to time in support of nuclear disarmament. The end of the Cold War rekindled the debate and prompted a reassessment of the purposes of French nuclear weapons when, for the first time in more than a century, France was not faced with a major external threat.

This paper provides a well informed view of the evolution of post-Cold War thinking about nuclear weapons in France. Nuclear weapons continue to be valued in strictly national terms in France, yet the paper now gives consideration as well to the possibility of multinational nuclear arms control. At the same time, it provides a reality check on just how difficult such negotiations are likely to be. Missile defense deployments in Europe also promise to be contentious in this regard.

This paper is part of the Atlantic Council's project titled "Further Reins on Nuclear Arms." This is a long-term effort to develop a common vision for the international leaders on how to reduce the risks posed by nuclear weapons. It conducts an ongoing assessment of the strategic environment and aims to stimulate rethinking about the context which shapes the purposes, types, numbers, stewardship arrangements, and employment plans for nuclear weapons. One of the main outcomes of the program's analyses and consultations is the identification and examination of key prerequisites for further reductions in nuclear arms inventories. Attention to such prerequisites, for each step of the process, is particularly important for military planners and arms control negotiators. This paper contributes to an understanding of the political and strategic context of nuclear weapons as it has evolved in one of the key nuclear states.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Following an unexpectedly heated debate surrounding the resumption of testing in 1995, a consensus has been reached in France on the role of nuclear weapons. The main political parties—representing about 95 percent of the electorate—endorse maintaining a minimal nuclear force posture for the purpose of “*dissuasion*,” the French version of deterrence.

Consensus was reached in large part by combining a commitment to work toward eventual disarmament while maintaining a credible deterrent force. This commitment has involved some cautious steps such as endorsing the non-proliferation and test ban treaties and may lead France to join in multilateral talks with Russia, the United States and others to reduce nuclear arsenals after the United States and Russia implement START II reductions, and if both continue to refrain from developing strategic ballistic missile defenses. France attaches great value to the ABM Treaty and considers ballistic missile defenses dangerously destabilizing because they undermine deterrence, create a false sense of security and are likely to lead to aggressive responses.

DISSUASION

Another important feature of the consensus is to continue to limit the use of nuclear weapons strictly to deterrence. They will not be planned or used for warfighting. French nuclear weapons remain primarily political in nature and intended to dissuade militarily stronger powers from risking an attack on vital French interests. A few political and military officials were unsuccessful in efforts to expand the role and develop low-yield nuclear weapons to dissuade weaker countries, particularly in northern Africa. The 1995 decision to curtail nuclear testing before the program was completed also resulted in terminating any efforts to develop low-yield nuclear weapons.

EUROPEAN DEFENSE

The most significant change in the new consensus is to link French nuclear weapons to European defense. Traditionally, French nuclear weapons were reserved solely for the defense of France. In the last few years suggestions by officials that French nuclear weapons might play a role in the defense of Europe have been coldly received throughout Europe, and any direct relationship probably will first depend on closer political integration and establishment of a European defense identity. Nevertheless, France and the United Kingdom have regularized talks on nuclear weapons and have publicly linked their vital interests.

Implementing a minimal *dissuasion* policy has resulted in major reductions in France's nuclear force posture and infrastructure. These changes reflect a reduced defense budget and a shift in priorities toward modernization of conventional forces. Since 1991, France reduced spending on its nuclear weapons programs by more than 50 percent, eliminated land-based nuclear missiles, reduced from six to four plans to build new ballistic missile submarines and is in the process of closing plants that produce fissile material for nuclear warheads.

These changes in policies and force posture indicate that nuclear weapons in France no longer play the prominent role that they did during the Cold War. Nevertheless, a broadly based consensus in France favors retaining these weapons as the ultimate security guarantee. This, however, will not preclude France from playing a more active role in preventing proliferation and joining in multilateral efforts to reduce the risks of nuclear weapons.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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French Nuclear Weapons Policy

After the Cold War

FRENCH NUCLEAR FORCES

France has considerably reduced its nuclear arsenal since the beginning of the 1990s. The determining element was almost certainly budgetary restrictions, even if this is not often mentioned publicly. From 1990 to 1997, spending on nuclear weapons was cut in half from 38.8 billion francs to 16 billion.¹ As a result it was impossible to retain all the projected programs and to upgrade all the components. In the coming years, the French nuclear arsenal will be considerably modified, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The upgrading of certain components will be accompanied by a reduction in their number.

The most dramatic change in French nuclear forces is the elimination of the ground-based missile portion of the triad. President Chirac announced the decision in 1995 in connection with the resumption of nuclear testing. In June he said “my objective is to obtain increased security for France at a minimum cost. With this in mind, I asked the government to review the conditions for closing the Plateau d'Albion² as rapidly as possible. I am not certain that this site continues to serve any useful purpose.” On February 22, 1996, President Chirac confirmed that “we are going to close the Plateau d'Albion. Our two submarine and airborne components are now sufficient to guarantee our security.”³

By closing down the Plateau d'Albion, President Chirac reversed the decision of his predecessor, who declared in a special speech on *dissuasion* on May 5, 1994, that “the decisions taken by the Defense Council, then by the Council of Ministers, guarantee that the 18 missiles of the Plateau d'Albion will be retained until 2005, when they will be replaced by the upgraded version of the M4 missile, the M45, while awaiting the development of the terrestrial version of the M5 missile.”⁴

¹ Report by Jacques Baumel on the law of the economy 1996. Cf. figures appended.

² Location of the French land-based ballistic missile system.

³ *Le Monde*, February 24, 1996.

⁴ Interview with François Mitterrand, May 5, 1994, *Service de presse de la Présidence de la République*.

The Plateau d'Albion is not the only nuclear capability sacrificed in the name of budget cuts and political imperatives. France continues to undergo "nuclear downsizing." Like the wave of measures passed in 1992, those announced by Jacques Chirac were motivated by budgetary and diplomatic factors. In 1992, President Mitterrand placed the Hadès missiles in storage rather than bring them into service. In 1996, Jacques Chirac went a step further by deciding to dismantle them. Never deployed, they cost 10.6 billion francs and poisoned Franco-German relations.

In addition to these reductions, the decision to close the nuclear test center will be almost impossible to reverse politically and diplomatically. The plants at Pierrelatte and Marcoule, which manufacture fissile material for nuclear weapons also will close by 2002.

This decision is in line with the prospect of a fissile material production cut-off treaty, planned as part of the commitment made by the nuclear powers during the conference in 1995 to extend the Non-Proliferation Treaty. This is not a major concern for France, which has a stockpile of fissile material to last for the next 50 years. Furthermore fissile material recovered from dismantled weapons could permit increases in the stockpile.

Of the five nuclear submarines currently in the strategic submarine force (FOST), four are always operational, and two of which are at sea. Each submarine has 16 M4 missiles and each missile carries six nuclear weapons, for a total of 384 nuclear weapons.

The new strategic submarine program originally called for six subs, but was reduced to three for budgetary reasons. More recently President Chirac confirmed that the SNLE-NG program would produce four submarines. By not constructing the fourth SNLE France would have saved 13 billion francs, but it would have had a serious drawback in terms of deployment. With four SNLEs, three can be operational at any given time. The SNLE-NG program is now estimated to cost 88.4 billion francs for four submarines. The average cost per sub increased from 10 billion francs in 1986 to 12.5 billion.⁵

"Le Triomphant," the first of the new series of submarines, entered into service in 1996. The second, "Le Téméraire," is scheduled to join the fleet in 1999, and the third, "Le Vigilant," is projected for 2002. The final submarine in the series is scheduled to become operational in 2007.⁶

The upgraded M45 missile will equip the first three SNLE-NGs when they become operational. The fourth will receive a new model missile, the M51. Relative to the M4 missile, the M45 carries more TN75 nuclear warheads which are also more stealthy

than the TN70 and TN71 carried by the M4s. The TN75 warheads, with yields of about 100 KT (equivalent kilotons of high explosives), also have an extremely sophisticated

⁵ Report by Jacques Baumel, 1997, p. 22.

⁶ Ibid.

penetration assistance system. The range of the M45 missile is greater than 4,000 km. The delivery dates for the three missile sets were 1996, 1999 and 2000, replacing the M4s which have been in use since 1965, 1987 and 1989, respectively.

The M45 missile will be replaced by the M51, and not the M5 missile as initially planned. The M51 will have a range of around 6,000 km and will cost 32.7 billion francs to develop rather than 42 billion for the M5.⁷ This saving also comes at a cost of reduced range. The M5 was to be able to carry a 1,400 kg payload to a range of 6,000 km or a 200 kg as far as 14,000 km, in the latter case with one or two rather than six nuclear warheads. With ranges over 10,000 km, French SNLES would have a true multidirectional capacity from the Bay of Biscay. Thus there would be no need to patrol north of a line between Scotland and Iceland where submarines are easier to detect.

The abbreviated tests in 1995 were not sufficient to fine-tune the TN100 warhead, as planned in 1994. The M51 should receive a new nuclear warhead, for the moment called TNN. The total ban on nuclear testing suggests that it will probably have similar characteristics to the TN75, but possibly with a new penetration system.

Although the strategic submarine force represents four-fifths of the French nuclear arsenal, an airborne component will remain. This consists of three squadrons of Mirage 2000 N, equipped with ASMP missiles. The aircraft carriers will also have two fleets of Super Etendards, equipped with ASMPs. This missile will be replaced after 2008 by a missile called ASMP 1 (or improved ASMP) which will have a range of 100 km at low altitude or 500 km at high altitude, compared to 80 and 300 respectively for the ASMP. Initially it will be adapted to the Mirage 2000 and then to the Rafale if necessary. The performance gain is therefore minimal, in particular compared with what the ASMP missile could have achieved. This program, which would have cost 15 billion francs, and for which joint manufacturing with the British was envisaged, was abandoned for budgetary reasons.

KEY ELEMENTS OF FRENCH NUCLEAR POLICY

DISSUASION

The 1994 White Paper on Defense outlines current thinking on *dissuasion*. Chapter IV, covering defense strategy notes: "France does not currently have any specified

⁷ Op. cit., p. 23.

adversaries. Its strategy remains essentially defensive. The refusal to resort to conventional and nuclear war upon which the *dissuasion* doctrine is based will continue to be its inspiration.”⁸

According to this document, possession of an independent nuclear arsenal “will remain an essential means for France to maintain the degree of freedom it requires to defend its interests.” However, it is specified that strategic autonomy “will no longer be based solely upon a nuclear deterrent, as the role of these weapons is becoming less central” due to fewer threats and less need to carry out new missions abroad.⁹

The White Paper on Defense reaffirms the traditional principle of *dissuasion* which is based “on the assumption that any adversary would consider the risks it would be running in attacking our country to be unacceptable, and to far outweigh any possible gain” and rejects the theories which were in vogue between 1992 and 1994 of nuclear weapons for combat, specifying that “French nuclear strategy is a strategy of *dissuasion*, and no confusion can be made between *dissuasion* and use.”¹⁰

In looking at *dissuasion* more closely, the White Paper on Defense notes: “The French concept of *dissuasion* will continue to be defined as the will and ability to intimidate adversaries to such an extent that they are deterred from threatening our vital interests, regardless of who they are, what levels of damage they are prepared to suffer and what they stand to gain.”¹¹ It refers specifically to the White Paper on Defense of 1972 which states that it is necessary to “render the idea of recourse to all-out war inconceivable as a political option.”

“Our *dissuasion* system must be reserved for protecting our vital interests, whatever the origin and form of the threat. There is no need to give too specific a definition of these interests, which are subject to the freedom of interpretation of the most senior state officials. Nonetheless, in essence, they are the free exercise of our sovereignty and the integrity of our national territory, its dependencies, its air space and surrounding waters.”¹²

⁸ White Paper on Defense, *La Documentation Française*, 1994, p. 73.

⁹ Op. cit. p. 76. President Chirac confirmed this point by declaring that “...nuclear *dissuasion* no longer occupies the same position as it did during the cold war. Although it still constitutes the ultimate assurance of our security and independence, it is no longer possible to make the entire military system dependent on it, and place must be made for the strategy of action which is based on conventional forces.” *Défense Nationale*, August-September, 1996 p. 9.

¹⁰ 1994 White Paper on Defense, p. 79.

¹¹ Op. cit. p. 82.

¹² Ibid.

The principle of minimal *dissuasion* remains a key feature and has been adopted by the other nuclear powers. Furthermore, it is a principle which stands up well to anti-nuclear advocates. In France's case, minimal deterrence was dictated at the beginning by budgetary demands, but it is now a political and diplomatic necessity. Today, more than ever, "trop de nucléaire tue le nucléaire,"¹³ meaning that to go overboard on nuclear weapons would kill them altogether.

Similarly, the non-specific nature of *dissuasion* has survived.¹⁴ Indeed, it is more pertinent today because the Soviet threat has disappeared and crises may now come in many different forms and from all different directions. This also raises questions about another important feature of *dissuasion* by which the weak (France) can deter the strong (USSR). Although the Soviet threat has disappeared, Russia still possesses a vastly superior nuclear arsenal. However Moscow may evolve politically, one fact will continue to be potentially destabilizing: the weight of Russia is unequalled by any other European country. France, therefore, will still be in an unbalanced relationship with Russia for the foreseeable future.

China's nuclear arsenal is another concern. Beijing's unequalled demographic weight and impressive territorial and resource base is beginning to translate into economic wealth. As China gains wealth, it is also modernizing its army. But China does not yet demonstrate any feel for dialogue with other countries, or an ability to take their point of view into account. It would therefore be particularly irresponsible for any government to disregard the prospect of a Chinese threat in the long term.

In fact, it is imperative that China be taken into account. And the relationship between France, and even Europe, and China will very probably, in 20 or 30 years' time, be another example of the weaker party deterring the stronger. It would therefore be prudent to ensure that France is in a position, not to defend itself against China, but to be able to avoid any form of *diktat* or blackmail.

While nuclear weapons are a great equalizer in dealing with more powerful countries, they are probably less useful in dealing with weaker countries. For France, this is particularly contentious in thinking about the weaker states. On balance, the prevailing thinking is that nuclear weapons are not all that useful to deter a weaker country. As some have put it: "You do not need a jackhammer to crack nuts."

Targeting strategy presents an even more delicate problem because it is typically presented in terms of counter-value or counter-force. With a small nuclear arsenal,

¹³ François Heisbourg, cf. *Libération*, September 1996.

¹⁴ Charles Ailleret, "Défense dirigée ou défense tous azimuts," *Défense Nationale*, December 1967.

France could only threaten nuclear strikes on Soviet cities and the leadership in Moscow. The threat of attacking targets in cities and the immense resulting destruction, probably prevents conflict from breaking out because the risk of loss is too high. This served to dissuade the USSR from attacking, but an anti-city strategy focuses anti-nuclear protest because it symbolizes the massacre of innocent civilians, as the commemoration of Hiroshima highlighted. Counter-arguments are made that strikes on armed forces are worse because they involve the idea of nuclear combat, not just *dissuasion*.

The aim is not to exterminate towns but to avoid war. This line of reasoning, however, is difficult to sell to the public. Therefore it is appropriate to retain an anti-city strategy, but not to say so publicly. Not because it is immoral—it is war that is immoral, not *dissuasion*—but because many people do not make the distinction and emotions run very high; thus, it is better not to face the issue head-on. As a result, the leadership prefers to provide a more general description of the nature of nuclear deterrence and give few details on targeting.

NO NUCLEAR WARFIGHTING

The second point on which consensus was reached was the limited military role of nuclear weapons. In his keynote speech on foreign policy delivered on 16 March, 1995, Jacques Chirac claimed to be in favor of “maintaining our concept of *dissuasion* which rules out, and I emphasize this, all idea of nuclear war.” He reiterated this view after being elected, stating that “France's nuclear strategy will remain dissuasive and hence defensive, ruling out all idea of nuclear war.”¹⁵

France, out of necessity, adopted a doctrine which precludes recourse to using nuclear weapons in battle. The reason for possessing nuclear weapons is not to win wars, but to avoid them. Behind this basic principle lies a much more complex reality. Nuclear weapons always have been perceived with ambivalence. French nuclear experts believe that the Americans applied conceptual outlines to nuclear weapons before they were fully understood. In France as well, there has always been a temptation to deny the political role of nuclear weapons and to ascribe to them a purely military function.

This issue became more prominent in relation to short range nuclear weapons. These arms are classified as tactical in the United States, and they were deliberately described as “prestrategic” in France, precisely to justify linking them with strategic nuclear weapons rather than conventional weapons.¹⁶

¹⁵ Jacques Chirac, “La politique de la défense de la France,” *Défense Nationale*, August-September 1996, p. 9.

¹⁶ See Pascal Boniface, *Vive la bombe*, Editions No. 1, 1992, pp. 116-28.

The campaign to resume nuclear testing was part of the debate to develop low yield, prestrategic nuclear weapons. In the early 1990s, the need to move towards “more flexible” methods of *dissuasion* was inexorably finding favor with the political leaders (both right- and left-wing) and the experts.¹⁷ Some argued that it was impossible to deter small countries, in northern Africa for example, using the same kinds of threats of massive strikes that were used against the Soviet Union. However, after the Berlin wall came down and after the Gulf war, proposals for using tactical nuclear weapons were abandoned in favor of precision-guided conventional weapons used for surgical strikes. Such weapons can ensure accurate strikes on selected targets without collateral damage. This also makes the less destructive weapons more readily usable. With less destructive power, however, conventional weapons cannot deter as well the threat of large-scale nuclear strikes.

Thus, according to traditional French doctrine, only nuclear arms can truly deter, but that is also all they may do. The debate on testing and low-yield nuclear weapons was resolved in favor of traditional policy which emphasizes the limited role of nuclear weapons—to deter their use by others.¹⁸ During the 1995 presidential campaign, the three main candidates all endorsed the traditional view of *dissuasion*.

On a television talk show in September 1995, President Chirac ruled out changing doctrine:

We do not have the technology for small weapons. We know how to make large weapons, we do not know how to make small ones. And small weapons are extremely dangerous because we could be more tempted to use them than large weapons. This is why this new generation of small weapons, which would require small-scale tests to be carried out in France or elsewhere, is very dangerous. The stand that I have taken since June, is that France would not accept the development of a new generation of weapons, all the more dangerous

because they are small and there is more temptation to use them. This is why, from the outset in June, I made it clear that France will take the ‘zero option.’¹⁹

¹⁷ See Pascal Boniface, *Contre le révisionisme nucléaire*, Editions Ellipses, 1994, p. 128.

¹⁸ See “Essais et doctrine nucléaire,” *Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, No. 20, Winter 1995, pp. 44-50.

¹⁹ 7 sur 7, September 10, 1995, Service de presse de la présidence de la République.

In fact, it appears that the 'zero option' was not reached until August 1995 and was mainly motivated by the desire to mollify international criticism of the tests by offering compensation in the disarmament field.

The decision to remain with a purely dissuasive concept was important for the fate of the French nuclear arsenal. A decision to develop low-yield weapons would have greatly strengthened the anti-nuclear lobby by clearly associating the nuclear weapons with warfighting, rather than with the idea of preserving the peace. At a minimum, it would have destroyed any possibility of a consensus among the political parties. Also, it would have strained relations with Germany by intensifying anti-nuclear sentiment there.²⁰

NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND EUROPEAN DEFENSE

A European deterrent must be the keystone of European defense. Although it will constitute the essential component of the European defense system, it also will be the last to be fitted into the structure. Just as there will be no European defense system without a political Europe, there will be no European deterrent without a European defense system. All attempts to invert the priorities are doomed to fail and could prove to be highly counter-productive, for both European integration and a nuclear deterrent.

Increasingly, the question of the connection between national nuclear weapons and the emerging European defense system became unavoidable. It was difficult for French leaders to maintain both that nuclear weapons provide the supreme guarantee of French security and that the construction of a joint European defense system is a major objective without establishing a link between the two.

Before 1992, France categorically refused to make its nuclear weapons available to a European defense. Such linkage was considered to be in conflict with French strategic realities and interests. According to the White Paper on Defense of 1972, "Nuclear *dissuasion* is a purely national issue. At present, the risk is not shared."²¹

France did not subscribe to the view of a European-scale nuclear deterrent as envisaged by the Americans, but France did not wish to propose a less credible, alternative version. French nuclear weapons, therefore, would protect the national territory and vital interests of France. Nonetheless, according to the authors of the

White Paper on Defense, Western Europe benefited from this strategy because "although the deterrent is reserved for protecting our vital interests, the boundaries

²⁰ See Pascal Boniface, "La dissuasion nucléaire dans les relations franco-allemandes," *Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, no. 10, Summer 1993, pp. 19-25.

²¹ White Paper on National Defense, foreword by Michel Debré, Minister of State for National Defense, Paris, Ministry of Defense, 1972.

of the latter are vague. A potential adversary would find it even more difficult to assess his room to maneuver, which strengthens the power of the deterrent.”²²

In 1976, the Army Chief of Staff, General Méry, went so far as to talk of a “broadened territory,” but, it generated such an outcry, the subject was quickly dropped. Throughout the eighties, President François Mitterrand stuck to the policy line laid down in the 1972 White Paper on Defense. In 1984 he declared that France had not hidden from its allies the fact that, beyond protecting its national territory and associated vital interests, it would be unable to take responsibility for the security of the whole of Europe.²³

President Mitterrand broached the subject in an address on January 11, 1992: “Is it possible to conceive a joint European nuclear doctrine? This will quickly become one of the major questions behind the construction of a joint European defense system.”²⁴

The 1994 White Paper on Defense also touched on the subject: “A European nuclear doctrine and European nuclear deterrent will only be achievable when there will be European vital interests, considered as such by the Europeans and understood as such by others. Until then, France does not intend to dilute its national defense resources in such a field under any pretext.”²⁵

Alain Juppé, then Minister for Foreign Affairs, revived the debate in January 1995 during a speech delivered for the twentieth anniversary of the Centre d'Analyse et de Prévision of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “After developing a joint doctrine between France and the United Kingdom, should our generation fear the prospect, not of a shared deterrent, but at least discussing the issue of *dissuasion* with our main partners? Might not adopting a single currency, and a new Franco-German contract alter France's perception of its vital interests?”²⁶

Unfortunately, the controversy on nuclear testing during summer 1995 weighed heavily on the debate. Faced with widespread negative reactions to lifting the moratorium, French leaders tried to justify resumption of tests by implying that they were not only

²² Ibid.

²³ Speech delivered at the Hague, 7 February 1984, in *Reflexions sur la politique extérieure de la France*, Paris, Fayard, 1986.

²⁴ *Le Monde*, January 13, 1992.

²⁵ White Paper on Defense 1994, prefaces by Edouard Balladur, Prime Minister, and François Léotard, Minister for Defense, Paris, *La Documentation Française*, collection of Rapports Officiels, 1994.

²⁶ Alain Juppé “Quel horizon pour la politique étrangère de la France?” *Politique Etrangère*, Spring, 1995, p. 147

carried out for France, but also for the benefit of European security. But this had the opposite effect and, indeed, it was the idea of a joint deterrent itself which came in for harsh criticism. The emotion aroused by the nuclear testing precluded serious discussion of a European deterrent.

This should not have been surprising. Nuclear tests always have been the most effective target for opponents of atomic weapons. France was not sufficiently aware of the sensitivity of nuclear issues throughout Europe. What was seen in Paris as progress and a major concession, left the majority of its partners cold to the issue. They did not like the idea of being “nuclearized” against their will and they were suspicious that such proposals might lead to requests for them to foot the costs of French nuclear weapons.

While nuclear *dissuasion* is perceived in France as enhancing independence and security, it is seen in Europe as unnecessarily provocative toward Russia and contributing to the proliferation problem. Furthermore, it fosters dependency with regard to other nuclear countries. This is unfortunate because there can be no true European defense system in a world with nuclear weapons without possessing some form of nuclear arms.

In Germany there is also an unnatural alliance between the Atlantic lobby, which does not want to give the impression of exchanging American for French protection, and the anti-nuclear lobby which is by nature hostile to the concept of *dissuasion*. They both reject the French proposal. In other countries, such as Austria and Sweden, there is strong anti-nuclear sentiment, whether for civil or military purposes. These countries, therefore, will be very cautious about any movement in the direction of the French proposals.

As the president of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Commission of the Senate, Xavier de Villepin points out, “agreement on a future European nuclear deterrent assumes that the approach to this deterrent will essentially be political. It will not involve stationing nuclear weapons around the territory of our partners, nor will it mean extending the French nuclear guarantee unilaterally. It will involve taking into consideration the fact that our vital interests are more politically than geographically oriented, and that France and its closest European partners—in particular Germany could form a joint strategic zone.”²⁷

France sought to soothe its European partners by reaffirming the purely dissuasive nature of its nuclear policy, setting aside the scenarios covering the actual uses of its

nuclear arsenal which could alienate the other European countries, and by committing itself more actively to nuclear disarmament.

²⁷ Report written on behalf of the Defense and Foreign Affairs Commission of the Senate for the 1997-2002 military program, p. 95.

France also shifted tactics and is pursuing bilateral cooperation. Franco-British cooperation may be the first step toward a broader future system of *dissuasion*. Cooperation was revived in autumn 1992 by Pierre Joxe and Malcolm Rifkind, and resulted in the setting up of a commission on nuclear policy and doctrine. The commission consists of a small number of top officials from the ministries of defense and foreign affairs.

François Mitterrand and John Major decided to make it a permanent commission. The work of the mixed commission discovered a remarkable similarity in doctrine. However, cooperation is not yet at the point of sharing targeting objectives.

During the 1995 Franco-British summit, the joint declaration stipulated that there were many points of common interest between the two countries on nuclear doctrine. Furthermore, John Major and Jacques Chirac indicated that they did not see any possible circumstances under which the vital interests of France could be threatened without those of Britain also being affected. It was the first time a public show of solidarity. It was also the first time that France agreed to broaden the territorial reach of its vital interests.

Despite such bilateral progress, a European nuclear deterrent is still strongly contested. Chirac implicitly acknowledged the limited prospects for an expanded deterrent in a 1996 speech in which he noted that France's partners are not the fifteen EU members, but "...essentially the Germans, the English and the Spanish are those closest to us. This already provides an incredibly complex basis for discussion."²⁸ Thus the ambitions raised in the summer of 1995 have been cut back considerably.

The major problem is timing. For Hubert Védrine, "it is certainly not with a nuclear deterrent that we will make any progress towards a European defense system...François Mitterrand could not believe that by opening up something that, by nature, cannot be shared, he would create a European defense policy."²⁹

Nevertheless, Lionel Jospin and other leaders remain committed to linking French nuclear weapons and European defense. In his January 1995 foreign policy speech as candidate for the presidential elections, Lionel Jospin declared that while nuclear

strength is "Now, by necessity, a national matter, it will one day serve a Europe whose defense-related identity will be confirmed."³⁰

²⁸ *Le Monde*, 24 February 1996.

²⁹ Hubert Védrine, "La politique étrangère de la France de 1981 à 1995," *Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, No. 24, Winter 1996, p. 25.

³⁰ *L'année stratégique 1996*, Paris: Editions Arléa, p. 18

NUCLEAR DISARMAMENT

French leaders now agree that disarmament and the maintenance of a nuclear deterrent are not incompatible. In the early 1960s, however, France opposed the arms control policies of Moscow and Washington. France was not opposed to the principle of disarmament, but to the fact that the American and Soviet action was very clearly intended to prevent France (and China) from emerging as nuclear powers. If Paris had signed the Moscow treaty on the partial banning of nuclear testing, it would not have been able to finish building up its strategic strength. France also opposed joint Soviet and American efforts to promote the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1968, even though it recognized France as one of the five official nuclear powers.

At the beginning of the 1970s, France did however, come out in favor of the U.S.-Soviet strategic arms limitation process. This process was limited to Russian and American weapons. For Paris, this had a dual advantage. The superpowers were not only taking an interest in the arsenals of other countries, but had set about limiting their own. Suddenly, the French arsenal took on greater importance, due, in particular, to the ABM treaty. France, however, refused to participate directly in these negotiations. The argument was simple: the difference between the strength of the superpowers and that of France was so great.

In 1983 President Mitterrand set forth three conditions for France to enter into nuclear negotiations:

- Reduction of conventional and chemical weapons imbalances in Europe;
- Termination of development of biological weapons technology; and
- Reduction of the central arsenals of the superpowers.

In 1991, President Mitterrand announced that France would sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty. By that time, it was clear that the proliferation of nuclear weapons was the primary danger and France had to show its commitment to fight it. France also announced a moratorium on nuclear testing in 1992.

President Chirac announced in February 1996 the end of French nuclear testing and declared that France would be the “champion of nuclear disarmament.” The choices

were as much dictated by budgetary factors as strategic ones. For the time being, however, France still refuses to participate directly in negotiations to reduce nuclear arsenals and subject them to verification under a multilateral arms control regime.

France still considers the discrepancy between its arsenal and those of Moscow and Washington too large for such participation. If the START II agreements actually reduce Russian and American arsenals to 3,000-3,500 warheads, France (which possesses 400) could participate in START III negotiations. For this to happen however, Moscow and Washington would have to refrain from embarking on anti-missile defense programs.

Development of missile defense systems poses serious problems for France. French leaders agree on the need for tactical missile defense systems to protect deployed troops, but development of advanced antiballistic missile defense technologies is highly criticized. France still attaches great value to the ABM Treaty and the notion of mutual vulnerability. Arguments are made in France for a tactical missile defense system to protect against emerging threats to the south. But missile defense systems are not needed to deal with small threats and the ABM Treaty provides a more useful framework for dealing with large scale attacks. The threat of retaliation is probably more than adequate to deal with such threats. Furthermore, the enormous costs of such systems would deprive funding for far more useful military modernization programs.

Thus, for France, ballistic missile defense (BMD) is considered dangerously destabilizing because it undermines nuclear deterrence and provides a false sense of security which could even fuel aggressive responses that are far less costly to potential adversaries. Furthermore, BMD could start an arms race, especially in space, at a time when arms control is making substantial progress in reducing the risks of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. For all of these reasons and the new consensus to work toward disarmament, French leaders can be expected to actively oppose BMD.

The new consensus in France unites advocates of the *dissuasion* policy and those who favor working toward disarmament. They also are united in the fight against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Now very few appear to be openly opposed to the disarmament process, while at the same time few are willing to get swept along by the anti-nuclear wave. *Dissuasion* and disarmament are now seen in France by the leaders of the major political parties and by those responsible for strategic issues, as complementing each other rather than as being mutually exclusive. This was not the case in the past.

In the future, we should expect France to play a more active role in disarmament. This is likely to be a cautious, step-by-step approach to create the conditions necessary to ensure security before any serious consideration is given to the possibility of eliminating nuclear weapons.

NUCLEAR WEAPONS AND FRENCH POLITICS

How did these changes come about? Since the beginning of France's Fifth Republic (1958), nuclear deterrence has played a determining role in French international policy. Nuclear weapons guaranteed French security and went a long way to allay fears of the Soviet threat. Yet, by maintaining these weapons independently from NATO, France also

enjoyed a relationship with the Soviet Union distinct from other European countries. This also meant France was less in need of American military protection, and was thus able to establish a less complex relationship with Washington, where independence prevailed over resigned obedience, without undermining Western solidarity. France, therefore, supposedly was not restricted or inhibited in its relationship with the two superpowers in the same way as other European countries.

For France, this created a difference in status. For example, in the relationship between France and Germany, there was a certain equality in the imbalance: France had the bomb, Germany had the *deutschmark*. During the Cold War, the former counted for more than the latter. And for the rest of the world, nuclear weapons gave France full membership in the superpower club. The Non-Proliferation Treaty, which France did not want to sign before 1992, further served to confirm this nuclear power status, while barring others access to the atomic club.

This perspective was reflected in the evolution of French nuclear doctrine, beginning with the actions of General de Gaulle, and subsequently in the work of Generals Buis, Poirier and Gallois. At the core of French nuclear doctrine is sufficiency of minimal or proportional response, and of deterring the strong by the weak. These terms, used interchangeably, were nonetheless based on a common understanding that France did not have the resources to keep up with the nuclear arms race started by the Americans and the Soviets. Furthermore, the belief that more is better simply does not apply in the case of nuclear weapons. Thus, the quantitative difference in arsenals did not prevent France from benefiting from all the advantages of being a nuclear power.

However, between 1989 and 1991, the faith in this doctrine was severely shaken. The collapse of the Berlin wall and the Soviet threat eliminated the major ostensible reasons for nuclear weapons. Although supposedly they were intended to ward off threats from all sides, in reality, they were focused exclusively on the Soviet threat.

The Gulf War also signaled the need to rethink the balance between French nuclear and conventional forces. The war demonstrated that the United States was the only true superpower and that France was lacking in non-nuclear military resources which proved essential to victory, including surveillance satellites, high-precision guided missiles and other conventional capabilities.

At about the same time, it became clear that preventing nuclear proliferation was the top priority national security concern after the collapse of the USSR and the discovery of

the Iraqi clandestine nuclear weapons program. This concern was reflected in the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

These developments all served to devalue substantially the importance of France's nuclear weapons. They were less necessary for defense, while at the same time there were glaring shortfalls in conventional forces. Instead of nuclear weapons providing for

stability through *dissuasion* in general, in cases such as Russia, they seemed to pose a risk in terms of proliferation. This all contributed to an increasingly intense wave of protest in France against the need for nuclear weapons.

ADAPTING TO A NEW ENVIRONMENT

This new strategic environment demanded changes in the role of French nuclear weapons. In the ensuing debate, advocates of nuclear weapons were on the defensive. Domestic groups called for disarmament, studies highlighting the limited utility of nuclear weapons, concerns about proliferation and fears of anti-western states or terrorist groups acquiring nuclear weapons. Denouncing nuclear weapons in official and unofficial circles was not new. However, the extent of these activities widened, particularly in connection with the debate on extending the Non-Proliferation Treaty and, even more importantly, the resumption of nuclear testing by France in 1995.

Although termed “the final series of tests of limited duration and extent,” they triggered one of the greatest defense controversies France experienced under the Fifth Republic. The media, which report relatively little on defense issues in France, gave the debate top priority. Coverage of reactions to testing even eclipsed reporting on the monumental decision to end national military service—a far more touching issue for most people.

The intense reaction was characterized by the director of Legal Issues of the Quai d'Orsay: “clearly, the relatively quiet period, where intellectual debate on the relationship between international public law and *dissuasion* has been confined to specialists, is over. The international debate has begun.”³¹

The most important part of the debate took place within the three main political parties—the Rassemblement pour la République (RPR, Gaullist), the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF, center-right) and the Parti Socialiste (PS). Ultimately they all endorsed the need for France to continue to maintain nuclear weapons.

Traditionally, the PS opposed nuclear testing.³² This was not because they disagreed with the concept of *dissuasion*, but because the party leaders considered that the tests were not

³¹ Marc Perrin de Brichambaut “La question de la licéité des armes nucléaires,” *Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, No. 21, Spring 1996, p. 129.

³² The RPR supported it completely whereas the UDF was more divided, with certain centrist leaders stating their opposition. Mr. Giscard d'Estaing also voiced his difference of opinion on this issue. Cf. *L'année stratégique 1996*, Editions Arléa, Paris, p. 12.

necessary to preserve France's power to deter, and that they could actually harm the process for extending the Non-Proliferation Treaty.³³

Eventually the RPR, the UDF and the PS concluded that a policy of *dissuasion* must be preserved. But it was not an easy choice. The socialists could have returned to an anti-nuclear position, which they held until 1978.³⁴ This would have cleared the political slate after 14 years of leadership, preserved the legacy of President Mitterrand and strengthened ties with the Greens and the communists. However, the socialists chose not to turn back even though they believed that the elections could not be lost on this issue. During the 1995 presidential election campaign, the new first secretary of the PS, Lionel Jospin wrote in his program: "the nuclear deterrent, supported by submarines, must remain the pillar of our defense strategy, the guarantee of our independence."³⁵ The socialist candidate linked *dissuasion* to the development of surveillance satellites, in the context of an association with our European partners, in order to build gradually a totally independent information and warning system.³⁶ Paul Quilès, responsible for defense matters within the PS, declared that "it is wise to preserve a policy of *dissuasion*, which should not prevent us from reconsidering its substance."³⁷

It took the PS years to gain credibility on this point. After it accepted the idea of *dissuasion* in 1978, and in view of President Mitterrand's own policy, it could no longer be attacked on this front. Therefore, the PS did not wish to jeopardize the essential trust that it acquired so painstakingly and at such cost. This is why, in particular, it refused to endorse the Canberra Commission report calling for the elimination of nuclear weapons. Michel Rocard, former socialist prime minister and member of the Canberra Commission, urged such an endorsement, but the

philosophy behind this document was deemed to be too strongly anti-nuclear, despite the moderate nature of many of the proposals.

However, opposition parties, including the National Front, some ecologists³⁸ and the communists did not adhere to the mainstream views. But their differences regarding the

³³ On the debate on resuming nuclear testing, see *L'année stratégique 1996*, Editions Arléa, Paris, pp. 9 to 15.

³⁴ On the conversion of the PS, see Pascal Krop, *La dissuasion, les socialistes et la défense*, PUF and Pascal Boniface, *Vive la bombe*, 1992, Editions No. 1.

³⁵ *L'année stratégique 1996*, Editions Arléa, Paris, p. 16.

³⁶ *1995-2000: Propositions pour la France*.

³⁷ *Le Monde*, 8 November 1995.

³⁸ See Pascal Boniface and Jean-François Gribinski, *Les écologistes et la défense*, Dunod, 1992.

nuclear issue did not completely preclude the possibility of a political alliance with those supporting the concept of *dissuasion*.

Consensus was reached by embracing both a policy of minimal *dissuasion* and a pledge to work for disarmament. Thus, a coalition government with this broad framework even accommodated the communists and the ecologists.³⁹ The participation of these parties in the Jospin cabinet had an ironic consequence: it is now much more difficult for them to criticize the nature of deterrence due to the need for governmental solidarity.

The French consensus on nuclear weapons policy now includes four main points:

- maintaining a policy of *dissuasion*
- refusing to resort to nuclear war
- creating a linkage between French nuclear weapons and European defense
- working actively toward nuclear disarmament.

This consensus should endure because of the broad agreement among the leaders of the political groups that such consensus is necessary in order to govern. Parties which support or at least which avoid to criticize the notion of *dissuasion* now account for 95 percent of the electorate, the highest rating ever for such a policy. Furthermore, French public opinion supports this consensus. For example 61 percent of the French people feel that France could not guarantee its own defense without the nuclear deterrent, 28 percent take the opposing view, 21 percent believe that it should be further increased and 32 percent that it should be continually updated. For 39 percent, the existing deterrent should be maintained, and 23 percent feel that it is time to begin cutting it back.⁴⁰ New developments, such as testing and new deployments, which could upset this consensus, are not anticipated.

Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin declared to an audience at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de la Défense Nationale on 4 September 1997 that “*Dissuasion* remains the pillar of our defense strategy. Indeed, it should be noted that the nuclear deterrent was neither created nor conceived purely in the context of the Cold War. Furthermore, the disappearance of antagonism between the East and the West does not call into question today its essential role in the defense of our territory and the protection of our vital interests. It would also be appropriate to emphasize that thousands of nuclear weapons remain stockpiled throughout the world. Despite the efforts to disarm and

³⁹ On the pragmatism of the Greens on this matter, see Yves Cochet, *Relations Internationales et Stratégiques* No. 9, Spring 1993, pp. 7-18.

⁴⁰ Sirpa, July 1996. The figures were respectively 58 percent and 31 percent in July 1995, just after it was announced that testing would be resumed.

notwithstanding the numerous international agreements and inspection procedures, of which France is now more than ever a part, nuclear proliferation, although considerably lessened, has not been brought to a complete halt.”⁴¹

CONCLUSIONS

Nuclear weapons no longer play the leading role they did while East and West were divided. It would nonetheless be very wrong to think that they have lost all purpose. French leaders consider that the nuclear deterrent has never been, and could never be, conceived as a possible response to all military challenges.

Although today, the military threat hanging over France is small, perhaps even non-existent, French territory and vital interests did not disappear with the USSR. Therefore, these interests must continue to be protected against any threat from any quarter. Regardless of who may become a possible adversary of France may be, only two scenarios exist: the threat of attack will either be large-scale, and in this case the adversary must be persuaded that a nuclear counter-attack would result, thereby deterring an initial attack; or it will be small-scale, and the involvement of nuclear weapons would not be justified. This reasoning was sound during the Cold War and remains appropriate today.

The dramatically changed geopolitical environment along with changing budget priorities has resulted in important changes in French nuclear weapons policies and force postures.

In 1996 Jacques Chirac declared before a group of army leaders that “A nuclear deterrent remains a prime necessity...but the savings made in this particular sector of defense will contribute to financing the adaptation of our conventional forces.” Accordingly, France needs to take advantage of the respite offered by the strategic situation, and rethink nuclear issues.⁴²

For Jacques Chirac, it is no longer a matter of making the entire military system dependent on the nuclear deterrent as during the Cold War. However, the nuclear deterrent still constitutes “the ultimate assurance of our security and the guarantee of our independence.”⁴³ The President also reaffirmed that “the nuclear strategy of France will remain dissuasive, and thus defensive, precluding all idea of war.”

French nuclear policy will continue to be described mainly in terms of broad principles rather than details, such as the exact scope of French vital interests and targeting. This is

⁴¹ Athena, *La Documentation Française*, no. 4, 2nd semester, 1997.

⁴² *L'année stratégique 1997* Paris: Editions Arléa, p. 18.

⁴³ “La politique de défense de la France,” *Défense Nationale*, August-September 1996, p.9.

mainly to avoid fruitless debate even though, according to the White Paper on Defense, “insofar as much uncertainty still surrounds the withdrawal of the threat of pressing the nuclear button, the boundaries of these vital interests must be specified, and our determination must be perfectly clear. This is the role of the ultimate warning.”⁴⁴ The desire for specificity reflects the French tradition of having things in black and white. France is a country whose law is based on written codes rather than precedence. The British approach is to publicly give only a general outline of their doctrine. France will follow Britain's lead in this area by not adopting too detailed a “written constitution” for its nuclear strategy.

The public emphasis should be on the political effectiveness of nuclear deterrent rather than its military effectiveness. In the new political environment the two tend to cancel each other out. This is why the decision to resume nuclear testing was counterproductive.⁴⁵ Certainly the tests provided technical information, but the technical advantages were clearly outweighed by the anti-nuclear protests which broke out in response to the tests.⁴⁶

Tactical or “prestrategic” nuclear weapons always have been a gray area in French strategy, some seeing them as weapons for a possible counter-attack, the extent of which could be carefully controlled.⁴⁷ General Arnaud de Foiard wrote some time ago:

“The role of tactical nuclear armament is to give the nuclear threat (in itself absurd and even unrealistic) a plausible and rational air, that is to say make it seem credible and therefore effective as a deterrent.”⁴⁸

The temptation to link tactical nuclear weapons to smaller threats has not completely disappeared. Jacques Baumel, who still backs the revision of the nuclear concept to adopt a specific stand with regard to countries to the south writes, “as for tactical and

⁴⁴ White Paper on Defense 1994, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Cf. Pascal Boniface, “Les essais contre la dissuasion,” *Le Monde*, 16 June 1995 and “When Testing Uppercuts Deterrence,” *International Herald Tribune*, 13 July 1995.

⁴⁶ Cf. Aymeri de Montesquiou, “Les réactions internationales à la reprise des essais nucléaires,” Rapport d'Information No. 2946, Assemblée Nationale, June 1996. The author considers that in European countries 80-90 percent of public opinion was hostile to the tests, though he believes the tests did not damage France's image over the long term.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Vive la bombe*, 1992, PP. 116-128.

⁴⁸ Général Arnaud de Foiard, “Autres propos sur la dissuasion nucléaire,” *Défense Nationale*, May 1980, p. 27.

strategic nuclear weapons theoretically designed to deliver an ultimate warning, they would appear to be indispensable for deterring the second-order powers who might be tempted to resort to blackmail on the basis of the ballistic weapons in their possession, or for responding to future risks of nuclear terrorism from criminal organizations.”⁴⁹

André Dumoulin holds the opposite opinion, “There can be no credibility in the use of ‘prestrategic’ nuclear weapons, because their nuclear nature would, in many instances, preclude their use. The warning shot can now involve an inhibiting strike which could be, in view of current technology, a conventional strike. It is not necessarily the nuclear nature of the strike which makes the ultimate warning credible, but rather the choice of target and the ability to neutralize it, an ability which could be fulfilled with high-energy, high-speed and high-penetrability conventional weapons.”⁵⁰

Similarly, the decision to give up nuclear testing for good has its critics. For example, Jacques Boyon noted, “this decision permanently compromises France's ability to carry out nuclear tests, even if in the future they prove to be indispensable again. Indeed, even though the President announced that France has carried out its final series of tests and that it has ‘amassed’ the years needed to develop simulation techniques, the scientific domain is full of surprises and it is not impossible that it could become necessary to carry out a few more tests, depending in particular on the behavior of the other nuclear powers”⁵¹

While a few of these issues will continue to be raised, the broad direction of French nuclear policy is not likely to change. The debate will mainly be about what level of effort is needed for minimal *dissuasion*. The reductions planned for French nuclear weapons reduce budgetary pressures and make it possible to participate in disarmament efforts while maintaining a reliable *dissuasion* policy for the foreseeable future.

Perhaps future reductions can be tied to worldwide reductions in nuclear forces. But in the meantime, consensus is strong in France to maintain a credible minimal deterrent force posture.

⁴⁹ Jacques Baumel, Budget Report, 1997, Assemblée Nationale, pp. 35-36.

⁵⁰ “Le noeud gordien des forces préstratégiques françaises,” *Le Trimestre du Monde*, 1996, T.1, p. 197.

⁵¹ Jacques Boyon, Report on Planning 1997-2002, p. 59.

GLOSSARY

ABM:	Anti-Ballistic Missile
ASLP:	<i>Air-Sol Longue Portée</i> (Air-to-Ground Long Range Missile)
ASMP:	<i>Air-Sol Moyenne Portée</i> (Air-to-Ground Middle Range Missile)
BMD:	Ballistic Missile Defense
EU:	European Union
FOST:	<i>Force Océanique Stratégique</i> (French Strategic Oceanic Force)
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PS:	<i>Parti Socialiste</i> (Socialist Party)
RPR:	<i>Rassemblement pour la République</i> (Gaullist Party)
SNLE:	<i>Sous-marin Nucléaire Lanceur d'Engins</i> (nuclear-powered ballistic missile launcher submarine)
SNLE-NG:	<i>Sous-marin Nucléaire Lanceur d'Engins–Nouvelle Génération</i> (new generation nuclear-powered ballistic missile launcher submarine)
START II:	Strategic Arms Reduction Talks II
START III:	Strategic Arms Reduction Talks III
UDF:	<i>Union pour la Démocratie Française</i> (federation of center-right parties)
USSR:	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics