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## France's 'silent revolution' on missile defence

The French government has been frequently regarded (Delpech, 2000) as a vocal critic of American plans for national missile defence (NMD). Although, the government had, its own interests in improving theatre missile defence, it saw NMD as a repeat of the ill-fated 1980s Strategic Defence Initiative (SDI) and consequently vociferously opposed it. NMD for the French government offered insecurity rather than security, particularly given that it would destroy the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

The French position has undergone a 'silent revolution' on NMD since then. An increase in the participation of French forces in out-of-area missions had already converted the government to the need for theatre missile defence, and a research and development programme in this area was begun with Italy. The policy mood changed more radically after 9/11. A internal rethink of French deterrence logic, which was carried out by a confined policy-making circle due to the specifics of the French model of democratic governance, led to the conclusion that deterrence could no longer be solely understood as nuclear and defensive but also as conventional and offensive (Military Programme Law 2003-2008). Perhaps even more important in this regard however is the role of the French defence industry. Its bid for participation in the development and construction of NMD, and the potential for French firms to thus enter the American defence market, did influence the government's reasoning on missile defence. The government's anti-American rhetoric was gradually silenced as it came into collision with industrial interests, who were trying to participate in the technological development of the programme. Thanks to the close entwinement between politics and the armaments industry in France and the value of the armaments industry to the French political elite, political oppo-

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sition has largely been relinquished although no political statements have been made as yet in favour of NMD. This article therefore argues that the French revolution on missile defence is a perfect illustration of the way in which Paris' positions on critical security capabilities are shaped silently by the interplay of national security needs and the interests of its military-industrial complex. To understand the reasoning influencing the way in which the French debate has developed though, it is important to understand how the factors that shape French defence and security decisions interplay.

## 1. The constants of French defence policy-making

Firstly, France understands itself to be a global player. The country is proud and protective of its status as a nuclear power and a permanent UN Security Council member. Commentators on French security policy frequently refer to the French aim of independence in national security, the belief in the primacy of the nation state and the search for *grandeur* or *rang* as tenets of Gaullism. This assertion risks though ignoring the historical pedigree of Gaullist ideas. As Kolodziej points out,

“French arms production and strategic military policy, including the raising, training and equipping of armed forces are inextricably entwined. However much French regimes - royal, imperial or republican - may have differed in composition, claims to legitimacy, or objectives, they could agree that France's independence, security, big-power role - grandeur no less - required an autonomous military strategy and national armed forces free from outside control.” (Kolodziej, 1987: 3)

This striving for autonomy necessitated autarky in armaments production. Defence technology though also fitted well into successive French governments' desire to make developing high technology and shaping systems integration into a key economic development priority (Lungu, 2004). The defence economy therefore plays a greater role in the French economy than in most other European countries and its administrators, the D el egation G en erale pour l'Armement (DGA), still remain a powerful force not only in the Defence Ministry but also in the state as a whole. The interests of the defence industrial sector are de facto a key part of any wider armaments policy decision.

Secondly, the French aim of European autonomy in security affairs has meant a difficult relationship with the United States. France remains a semi-detached member of NATO and is open in its belief that Europe, in the shape of the EU, needs fully independent military resources to counter US domination. The view that it is undesirable to have a unipolar world, and that NATO risks becoming an imperial structure designed to serve the hegemonic power of the United States, is widespread in France. This has the consequence that security ideas, policy changes and technological developments emanating from the United States are almost inevitably received with mistrust in Paris. France was legitimately concerned that the United States was embracing a national missile defence system as an alternative to cooperative diplomacy as a means of reducing foreign threats. “By doing so, France worries, the United States would worsen the security dilemma for its friends and foes without significantly improving security at home.” (Vaisse, 2001) The political classes in Paris were neither convinced by the technical feasibility of the American plans nor saw NMD as a way of strengthening the strategic balance at that time. Even worse they thought that the shattering of the ABM Treaty not only damaged their own nuclear deterrent but also could lead to a renewed arms race. The French government therefore was a vehement critic of US plans on national missile defence for a long time.

This mistrust though is coupled with a determination that the EU or France should not fall too far behind the US in military matters. The latest French security policy document, the “2003-2008 Military Programme Law” clearly points out the necessity, to “maintain necessary technical know-how to ensure, through time, the credibility of nuclear deterrence, to develop the resources of

protection against new threats, and to preserve an industrial base, essentially European, to manufacture our major defence systems." (2003-2008 Military Programme Law, 2003: 22).

Thirdly, the environment in which security policy decisions are taken is important. France is a democracy but has some specific features. Using Lijphart's classifications of democracies, it would be classified as a majoritarian democracy (Lijphart, 1999), while commentators on French politics in the Fifth Republic have additionally pointed towards a presidentialisation of the system (Lovecy, 2000). The French constitution gives the president huge powers in the area of foreign and security policy, which have been exercised to the full, while the legislative has few. This means that security decisions tend to be taken by a policy elite, often with little transparency and without the involvement of party politics. Moreover, a broad consensus exists on the foundations of French security policy. The symbolic status afforded to French nuclear weapons enjoys cross-party support and there is broad agreement on the importance of the defence industrial base for France's technological and economic future. Similarly, the peace movement in France is almost entirely devoted to a critique of US military policy. Relatively little critical attention is paid to France's own policies. Where missile defence is concerned this means that little public attention is being paid to French deliberations, especially as there is no key focus issue to target.

## 2. Changing French Threat Perceptions

These constants of French defence policy-making provide the context for the emerging debate on missile defence in France. While the debate was still homogenous throughout the 1990s, focussing only on the risks France might have to face once the US and Russia agreed on a new strategic equilibrium in the post ABM treaty era, it diversified with the beginning of the new millennium. The 9/11 terrorist attacks against the United States had a major impact on French thinking about security. The consistent French desire to play a major role in security politics opened up a debate on whether or not the country's military capabilities would allow France to deter and confront asymmetrical threats.

The 2003-2008 Military Programme Law states: "Having spent too many years for peace to bear fruit, a new effort is now needed to put us in a position to defend the interests of our citizens, in France, Europe and throughout the world." (2003-2008 Military Programme Law, 2003: 9). It emphasises the need to update the 2015 armed forces model, which had been launched by President Chirac in 1996 in order to meet new protection requirements: "for deployed troops confronted with the danger of massive destruction weapons, notably biological and ballistic missiles; for populations within the domestic territory, in particular from mass terrorism." (Ibid: 10). A few pages later it acknowledges that the imperative protection of its soldiers and citizens "is built on the development of a theatre anti-missile capability." (Ibid: 23).

Troops will not only be protected by a theatre missile defence. On June 8<sup>th</sup> 2001, President Chirac announced a major change to French nuclear strategy. Its nuclear deterrent has to enable France to protect its vital interests in future against regional powers possessing nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. This announcement was followed by a controversial debate about whether the current nuclear capabilities could efficiently deter any potential B- and C-weapons aggression. Even if the government has not yet decided definitely to develop mini nukes, France nevertheless possesses all the necessary technological knowledge and simulation facilities to credibly build them. It is more than likely that France intends the establishment of a New Triad, as mentioned in the American Nuclear Posture Review, built on the interplay between nuclear, offensive and defensive conventional and C<sup>4</sup>ISR capabilities (Kempin, 2004).

## 2.1 Broader efforts to cope with WMD proliferation

These strategic reflections also find expression in France's attitude towards the international instruments aimed at ensuring non-proliferation. It is true that France still remains convinced of the sense of international non-proliferation regimes. After all it is only through their maintenance, and above all their further development, that the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their carrier systems, considered by Paris to be one of the biggest future dangers facing France, can be prevented. France therefore promotes the universal acceptance of the Hague Code of Conduct (HCOC) and seeks to establish effective confidence-building measures between its member states. And it is for this reason, that France has submitted some far-reaching proposals relating in particular to the rules on pre-notification of ballistic missile and space launch test firings. Similarly, France acts as the point of contact or secretariat for the Missile Technology Control Regime (MTCR), organising at least one meeting per year of the Member State delegations. France works particularly here on furthering cooperation with non-members to ensure that the MTCR is better able to act against current ballistic missile proliferation.

But, since the ratification of the Military Programming Law 2003-2008, it has been established that France's non-proliferation policy no longer confines itself to multilateral arms control. Its strategic concept for the prevention of proliferation as well as for dealing with those states, who have acquired weapons of mass destruction, now for the first time includes the possibility of using military means to enforce French non-proliferation policy. France wants to be able to oppose proliferation threats and potential use of WMD in future with preventative military actions. Paris, in short, is no longer prepared to depend on diplomacy and international organizations to ensure its own security. Once again this shows the strength of the intertwining of French thoughts of themselves as a *grande nation* (we are an international actor able to influence every respect of world events) and autonomy (we can manage this on our own, regardless of whether international institutions succeed or fail). However, grand strategic thinking only explains part of the shift in the French position.

## 3. The French Military-Industrial Complex and Missile Defence

When considering France's position on missile defence, the role of the military industrial complex in France must be taken into consideration. As Kolodziej once wrote,

“Making arms, conventional and nuclear, is now woven deeply into the fabric of France's scientific and technological establishment, industrial plant, business practices, governing process - even its cultural mores.” (Kolodziej, 1987: 3)

The comparative weight of the defence industry within the French economy can be explained not only by the French need for autarky in armaments production if independence in defence policy was to be sustained, but also by the French state's *dirigiste* industrial policies, which placed a high value on technological competitiveness. With the partial exception of Giscard d'Estaing's presidency, the state has tried consistently to create national champions<sup>2</sup>, often under at least partial state control, and to support projects that would increase national prestige. Defence firms fitted this pattern perfectly. Although the Europeanisation of French armaments policy and the privatisation of some defence firms has weakened this national focus to an extent, there is still a strong perception among its partners, that the French state continues to push its national interests rather than the European interest both within EADS

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly in the 1960s and early 1970s French governments promoted one or two firms per industry thus creating so-called national champions: Chirac and Sarkozy revived this policy in 2004 (Theil, 2004). This strategy was based on the belief that only large firms could compete successfully in global markets (Adams, 1989: 53-4).

and in the wider European defence industrial restructuring process (Küchle, 2003: AFP, 2003).

In many ways the American strategy for gaining European acceptance of National Missile Defence (NMD) resembles that of the Reagan administrations over the Strategic Defence Initiative in the 1980s (Pianta, 1988). By tempting foreign firms with possible involvement in the programme, they hope that these firms will influence their governments. EADS, for example, wants a role in the US national missile defence programme. At a joint press conference at the 2002 Farnborough Airshow, Boeing announced it had established a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on missile defence with EADS to begin working on a cross-continent missile defence system. Boeing is the prime contractor for NMD, responsible for the development and integration of the ground-based midcourse defence (GMD) elements (EADS, 2002). The French government is ever mindful of how much of a technological advantage the US would have if NMD works, and so is likely to be affected by this EADS move.

An important facet of the French military industrial complex is the close relationship between the firms and the state. There are two factors in this, which are difficult to disentangle: the training and career structure of those working in the sector and the attitude of industry towards the state. The majority of those in executive positions in both the state and the industrial side of the sector have received the same training and belong to the same elite *corps d'armement*. There is a powerful unifying effect binding the alumni of the elite schools and their professional body, the *corps d'armement*, intensifies this. When this is added to the prevalence of *pantouflage*<sup>3</sup>, it is clear that there are very strong links between the state side and the industry side. Moreover, there are relatively few signs of independent industrial views emerging that are clearly distinguishable from those of government policy. The corrosive relationship between BAE Systems and the UK government for instance is unimaginable in France. This is perhaps because there is little tradition of entrepreneurship in the sector; most industrial figures are first and foremost engineers with less interest in business. However there are also signs that French industrialists in this sector do not have many problems with the idea of state involvement feeling that pressures from private shareholders are little different. The French state in turn closely identifies with the interests of French defence firms and takes them into account in policy-making.

### 3.1 French Involvement in Missile Defence Programmes

It should also be noted that France has long promoted work on more limited theatre missile defence (TMD) (but arguably raising many of the same proliferation concerns), an area where French firms have enjoyed considerable export success in the past. Theatre missile defence is also seen as more strategically useful for South European countries, given that short range missiles are a more likely threat than long range ones. France, Italy and to a limited extent Britain are working on an air defence system based on the "Aster" surface to air missile (SAM), built by EuroSAM, a joint venture of the Anglo-French-Italian Matra BAe Dynamics Aerospace (MBDA) company and the French firm Thales. The Aster will be used as both a naval and a mobile ground-based SAM (SAMP/T) by the French armed forces. The initial Block 1 Aster 30 will only have a limited TMD capability, but a more capable "Block 2" system was under discussion in 2004. Work is underway for example on a satellite missile warning and tracking system to cue the missile, as well as on an advanced radar to provide missile guidance. The Block 2 Aster is expected to go into service in 2012 (Taverna and Nativi, 2003). The projects costs were initially fixed at 3 billion €, but in 2001, France and Italy agreed on some additional 150 M €. <sup>4</sup> On 22 March 2002, France, Britain and Italy signed a

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<sup>3</sup> The network of contacts enables exchanges between the public and private sectors within the course of a career: this practice is known as *pantouflage*.

<sup>4</sup> La vocation antimissile du Samp-T s'amplifie, in: *Air & Cosmos*, 28.08.2003, p 16-20.

MoU for the production of seven Principal Anti Air Missile Systems (PAAMS), the main weapon system of the Franco-Italian Horizon-class air-defence frigates and the British Type 45 destroyer. The project's development costs of 2.08 billion € will be equally shared by the three partners.<sup>5</sup> EADS has also proposed a concept for a high-altitude interceptor missile named "Exoguard", although details remain unclear. Most recently, on July 20<sup>th</sup> 2004, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman and EADS signed a memorandum of understanding on closer cooperation in the development of the American National Missile Defence.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, French participation in NATO development studies on ballistic missile defence point to signs of change on the part of the French government. Indeed there has been a distinct distancing of the French government from its earlier policy of strictly limiting the programmes to in-theatre capacities. Even though earlier overall feasibility studies had leaned towards favouring an American coordination of the components of the missile defence and individual national capacities, French participation has continued. Such a configuration would mean a level of abandonment of sovereignty, but the expected French protests have not come, which industrialists consider to be a further sign that France is now unwilling to openly disassociate itself from Washington on this project. Industrial interests again are high. The participation of two French firms (Thales and EADS-ST) in a feasibility study on the protection of populations, contracted by the NATO NSC3 Agency, was the object of a special agreement negotiated with the French interdepartmental commission on arms exports (CIEEMG) in 2003. SAIC/EADS, together with a Thales team and Raytheon, was retained in September 2003, to carry out this follow-on phase of the earlier overall studies (TTU Europe, 29.01.2004).

It seems therefore relatively clear that although the French government has not openly committed itself to anything beyond theatre missile defence and some wider research, it is keen to be involved through its firms in any technological advances associated with NMD, probably with the hope of using them in a European missile defence project. The advantages of missile defence for the French defence firms will inevitably be considered alongside the strategic conditions, when France is forced to make an open decision on proposed intercontinental missile defence schemes or participate fully in a NATO Active Layered Theatre Ballistic Missile Defence programme (the principle of which was agreed in the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul) (Davis, 2004).

### 3.2 The Key Actors in the Decision on Missile Defence

The debate on ballistic missile defence in France is taking place substantially behind closed doors (if in fact debate is the correct word). NGOs have little access or influence. As Cohen (2003) argues the resistance of the French state to NGOs, viewing them at worst as a threat to the independence of the state and its democratic spirit (Védrine, 2000), means that particularly in areas seen as vital to the state interest like security, they have little impact. Similarly, the lack of a focus issue, unlike in Denmark with Thule or Britain with Fylingdales, coupled with the initial very critical stance of the French government has meant that civil society attention to the French debate has been minimal.

The fact that security policy is a presidential domain means that parliamentary involvement is minimal and not particularly influential. In this regard it is not surprising that three parliamentary reports that recommended a change of policy, passed unnoticed by the media and indeed by many parliamentarians. The National Assembly's report recommended discussing efficient means to counter ballistic threats inside NATO. The key reporter, Paul Quilès, defence minister under the Mitterrand government, could not find evidence that the American

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<sup>5</sup> France, Italy and the UK sign PAAMS MoU, in: Jane's Defence Weekly, 10.04.2002.

<sup>6</sup> US-Konzerne holen EADS zur Raketenabwehr, in: Financial Times Deutschland, 20.07.2004.

projects were directed against the construction of a European Security and Defence Policy. He asked the government to start a dialogue on achieving the conditions for strategic stability after the Cold War with the administration in Washington (Quilès, 2001). Other MP's demanded increased information on the dangers that French soldiers are facing in out of area operations where they might be attacked by short range ballistic missiles. A second Palais Bourbon report claimed it was necessary to introduce the notions of active and passive defence to the French concept of deterrence and to introduce new, appropriated military means to do so. (Lellouche, Chauveau, Warhouver 2000). Similarly, the Senate's reporter Xavier de Villepin, father of the current interior minister, had already predicted in 1999-2000 that the emergence of missile defence would introduce new concepts of defence. Therefore, missile defence would have to be integrated in France's defence doctrine as an imperative. (de Villepin 1999/2000). These rapporteurs however are known to be members of the French security elite and these reports seem to echo a controversial strategic debate going on largely behind closed doors. So who are the actors involved?

Firstly, we need to recognise that defence policy-making in France is still a very elitist affair centring on the *corps* of administrators and officers with the addition of some academics, who tend however to have enjoyed a similar training. All the individual *corps* have similar characteristics. Their members tend to have had the same training in one of the elite schools such as ENA or *École Polytechnique*. These schools as well as offering advanced administrative or technical training also teach their students to serve the state and their training has a unifying effect on the students. Thus, members of the *corps* tend to have very similar outlooks and ideas. The *corps* structure reinforces the unifying effect of the common training and produces a loyalty to each other that frequently outweighs other considerations. Nevertheless, in recent years there have been signs that the consensus that has thus far reigned over French defence policy is dissolving.

Where missile defence is concerned it could be argued that we essentially can speak of two overlapping groups. Firstly, there is, as discussed above, there is a coherent and powerful defence industrial sector. This sector represents the intent to derive the best deal out of missile defence for French firms, and so the French economy, possible. The DGA here identifies strongly with the firms' evident interest in all types of missile defence, which helps to make up a coherent voice. This is not unusual; Mathieu has argued that the coherence of this epistemic community is due to the *corps d'armement*:

"What cements it [the military-industrial complex: the authors], which is not to say constitutes it, for it is a part of the complex, is the community originating in the *corps [d'armement]*, whose training gives them the thoughts and interests of engineers, who occupy the directorial posts of the DGA as well as those of the main arms companies, who sometimes in the course of their careers pass from the service of the state (conception of specifications, control of the sector) to that of the production companies amongst which are the paper companies intended to carry out export<sup>7</sup> operations in such a way that no-one can understand the conditions." (Mathieu, 1996: 109)

Secondly, in the French case strategic thinkers have been key. The missile defence debate has been affected by the wider debate on the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Broadly speaking there are three camps. Firstly, there is a group often referred to as the *jeune école*, who believe strongly in the RMA, feel new technology can allow the reshaping of French defence policy to focus on power projection and military intervention and criticise the consensus on nuclear strategy as stifling debate (Bratton, 2002: 96-7). This group, often involving young officers and some political figures, tends to agree with the US position on missile defence arguing that it is riskier to be left behind technologically<sup>8</sup>. The second group, older army offi-

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<sup>7</sup> The levels of French arms exports and the conditions under which they are carried out are opaque.

<sup>8</sup> See Lavarini (2002) for a sample of this argument.

cers and intellectuals, reject the RMA "in large part because it is American" (Bratton, 2002: 98). Their positions can be differentiated: one section feels strongly that the threat from long range missiles is not a problem for France and that therefore a limited theatre missile defence system would suffice. Another group sees missile defence as predominantly an American exercise in hegemony, which by diverting European money away from European procurement projects would wreck French defence industry<sup>9</sup>. In between these two groups is a selection of analysts, like General Alain Baer and François Géré who have tried to formulate a "RMA à la française". This strategy has concentrated in finding ways to feed this new technology meaningfully into European defence policy and European defence industry, while leaving the special status of the French nuclear component untouched. This tactic allows for a U-turn on missile defence politically as it can be viewed as a European rather than American project and this seems to be what has happened.

### 3.3 An Exceptional Policy Change?

This type of U-turn is by no means unusual. France has already acted similarly in two other instances as already mentioned, which also highlight the direction in which French strategy is moving. France rejected a pre-emptive strike against Saddam Hussein mainly on the grounds that it considered such action to be contrary to international law. Nevertheless, contemporaneously in the 2003-2008 Military Programme Law, the following sentence appeared:

"Outside our borders, within the framework of prevention and projection-action, we must be able to identify and prevent threats as soon as possible. Within this framework, possible pre-emptive action is not out of the question, where an explicit and confirmed threat has been recognised." (Military Programme Law 2003-2008: p.23)

Similarly in relation to the further development of nuclear capabilities, France has left the possibility open of building mini-nukes and to alter its classic nuclear doctrine.

The French deterrence doctrine, which during the Cold War was based upon pure nuclear deterrence, was extended in June 2001 to cover the deterrence of potential attacks with chemical and biological weapons. This latter development brought a discussion to life as to whether the current French nuclear capabilities provided a credible deterrence for this new strategy or whether new mini-weapons were needed. A final decision on the continuation or alteration of the French nuclear doctrine to cover this had at the time of writing not been taken. Those with political responsibility remain vague on the subject. However, given the unusual (in French terms) extent of the agreed build-up of offensive (cruise missiles) and defensive (missile defence) conventional capabilities, the future of nuclear capabilities can not remain open for much longer. All the conventional activity seems to add up to either a marginalisation of nuclear weapons or a change in the deterrence strategy. Recent decisions strongly suggest a change in nuclear strategy is more probable. In the last four years though clear increases to the nuclear budget were made, which suggest a continuing requirement for nuclear deterrence. Similarly, France is devoting major financial resources to trying to successfully develop a simulator programme by 2010, which would make it possible to plan and reliably test nuclear warheads in line with standard usage regardless of size. A development, which would realign nuclear and conventional deterrence strategies in line with one another, similar to the American new triad, cannot therefore be excluded any longer. Moreover the development of mini-nukes as an offensive concept for conflict prevention is being openly discussed in France. They would have the goal of increasing the credibility of the conventional deterrence and according to this argument become an operational part of defence. This like the new acceptance of pre-emptive action shows the evolution of French strategic thinking in areas cognate to that of missile defence (Kempin, 2004).

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<sup>9</sup> See Hébert (2002) for a sample of this argument.

#### 4. Conclusion

France's revolution on missile defence is the product of two mutually reinforcing pressures; defence industrial interests and changes in French strategic thinking. The decision-making context is also framed within the constants of French defence policy; the belief that France is and must continue to be a global military player (even if in future under the EU flag), a desire for autonomy and a fear of being beholden to the United States, and the ability to keep defence policy decisions limited to a small elite behind closed doors. Firstly, it is clear that the position of French armaments firms within the French economy is still seen as vital and that their lobbying power is sufficient to push politicians into policy changes. Secondly, evolutions in French strategic thinking have quietly led the French government to positions very similar to those staked out by the Bush administration and considerably more radical than the aims of the European Security Strategy.

This article however, has called this revolution a 'silent revolution'. French government ministers or the President have not yet openly admitted their change of strategy. They have confined their open decisions to technological questions and have yet to make any statement on the political and military consequences of the implementation of their technical decisions. The question will be whether the habitual non-questioning and supportive stance of the French media, civil society and political classes towards major defence policy change announcements, will also hold true on the question of missile defence. Given however, that there is no Fylingdales or Thule type focus issue, perhaps though the question should be; would anyone even notice such a statement on missile defence?

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