

TAILORED DETERRENCE - A FRENCH PERSPECTIVE

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France is not at the forefront of the debate within NATO on the future of deterrence and retains a fairly conservative nuclear policy. However, the evolution of the French nuclear deterrent has been largely in tune with US and UK policies.

Nuclear Deterrence With Smaller Arsenals

Nuclear weapons will remain the ultimate guarantee of a nation's survival for the foreseeable future. There is no alternative means of defense on the horizon which may threaten in a credible way the complete destruction of a State as a coherent entity, in just a few minutes. Conventional weapons could conceivably do the job, but only through repeated and multiple raids and with a lesser guarantee of success. Moreover, conventional weapons cannot instill in the adversary's mind the very peculiar fear induced by nuclear weapons. Biological weapons are arguably as scary as nuclear ones - and perhaps even more so, in particular for public opinion. But their use can be controlled only with difficulty. More importantly, they are not able to physically destroy government buildings, factories, command posts and arsenals. Unless perhaps deployed in space in very large numbers, strategic defenses will not be effective against a large number of missiles equipped with decoys and multiple warheads. Finally, threatening some particular hardened targets will continue to be possible only by nuclear means.

But future deterrence will be ensured with smaller nuclear arsenals. In the coming twenty years, Western nuclear stockpiles will continue

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to be reduced. There are six reasons for this.

Dramatic increases in the accuracy of conventional weaponry mean that many targets which previously could be threatened only by nuclear forces can now be neutralized by conventional means.

Increases in accuracy and reliability also affect nuclear planning: all things being equal, having more accurate and reliable warheads means that some reductions in arsenals are feasible.

In the absence of nuclear testing, all nuclear powers will have to go down the road of more robust warhead designs. This means bigger and heavier warheads, and thus a reduction in the number of weapons carried by ballistic missiles. This could also mean a reduction in the number of warheads kept in reserve.

As time passes and the nuclear “taboo” gets more entrenched with each year that separates us from the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, it is possible that nuclear strike options may be reduced in size and scope. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, the use of thousands of nuclear weapons in a single set of strikes appears incredible. Threatening the use of hundreds of nuclear weapons will soon appear as lacking any credibility.

Development and modernization create vulnerabilities. Many countries rely on a few economic centers and transportation nodes for their economic growth and development. Thus, it might become possible to threaten “unacceptable damage” to a large, developing State with only tens of well-targeted weapons.

The growing support for the idea of abolition within Western political and intellectual elites will contribute to pressures for further reductions.

Furthermore, if the United States and Russia were to abandon large-scale planning options aimed at conventional and nuclear forces, their stockpiles could probably be reduced to hundreds instead of thou-

sands of nuclear warheads. However, such an eventuality would require assurances that China would not increase dramatically the number of its own nuclear forces. Neither Moscow nor Washington would like to see China become the strongest nuclear power. This, in turn, would require a strategic decision by the United States to limit the extension of its strategic missile defense deployments – a decision which would mean accepting the vulnerability of the US homeland to a Chinese ballistic strike. Whether this is an acceptable choice is up to the U.S. government. In any case, a significant reduction in total nuclear stockpiles would take a lot of time, given the quantity of warheads that would need to be dismantled.

Tailored Nuclear Deterrence Requirements

Most nuclear weapon States, with the possible exception of Pakistan, now have to consider multiple potential adversaries.¹ Threats will also be more diverse than was the case during the Cold War, when survival was at risk for the Western world and the Communist world. The need to “tailor” nuclear deterrence will be almost universal.

Communication is a key problem. A common understanding of the stakes and proper communication of threats will be absolute necessities. When stakes get high, failing to understand the stakes and communicate effectively may be fateful. On several occasions in the past, the world came close to a nuclear war: in 1962 (the Cuban missile crisis), but also to a lesser extent in 1973 (the Yom Kippur war), in 1983 (the NATO *Able Archer* exercise), and in 2002 (the India-Pakistan face-off).

Unfortunately, history shows that such understanding is all too frequently lacking. A few recent examples testify to that fact. In 1990, Saddam Hussein did not think that the invasion of Kuwait would trigger such a strong reaction from the United States, while Washington thought that an Iraqi invasion would not be a rational decision.² In 1999, Slobodan Milosevic did not believe that NATO would have the fortitude to escalate

¹ There is no available evidence to suggest that Pakistan’s nuclear deterrent could be directed at any country other than India.

² Alex Hybel, *Power over Rationality* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 51-56.

the conflict, and expected support from Moscow.³ For its part, the Alliance underestimated Serbia's determination to resist.⁴ In 2003, Iraq expected a limited American bombardment, not an invasion.⁵ The United States – as well as many Western analysts – could not believe that Iraq had gotten rid of its weapons of mass destruction, or, if it had, that it would not have kept detailed records of the implementation of such a decision. In 2006, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah did not expect such a strong Israeli reaction.⁶ Conversely, the Israelis had not imagined that their enemy could be so well-trained and well-equipped.⁷

Tailoring deterrence requires excellent intelligence and analysis capabilities, as well as adaptive, quick-reaction planning.

As for the nuclear dimension *per se*, deterrence has to reconcile two imperatives. It has to be credible in the eyes of an adversary: this implies maintaining the option of using smaller yields for less-than-vital contingencies involving regional powers, especially when targets are located in urban areas. However, tailored deterrence should not be equated with low yields in all cases. Critical or time-sensitive targets may be hardened or have a large footprint. If a Western head of State or government was to seriously consider the use of nuclear weapons, he or she would demand the highest possible chance of success. There would be only one thing worse than initiating a nuclear strike, and that would be initiating such a strike and failing to end the conflict.

Tailoring nuclear deterrence presents particular challenges for smaller nuclear powers. Their capabilities in terms of intelligence and analysis, which are essential in order to exercise a credible and appropriate deterrent threat, are necessarily limited. They may not give smaller nuclear powers the ability to understand and properly take into account a

³ Keith Payne, « The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction », *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 22, n° 5, 2003, p. 414, p. 422.

⁴ Bill Sammon, « Clinton Misread Yugoslav Resolve », *The Washington Times*, 21 June 1999.

⁵ « Interrogator: Invasion Surprised Saddam », *CBS News*, 24 January 2008.

⁶ Amos Malka, « Israel and Asymmetrical Deterrence », *Comparative Strategy*, vol. 27, 2008, p. 15.

⁷ Adam Garfinkle, *Culture and Deterrence*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 25 August 2006, p. 6.

wide range of potential adversaries. Increased flexibility in terms of warhead types and yields may not easily be reconciled with nuclear surety constraints. Managing a diverse force at low numerical levels is not an easy task given the very high standards that are applied in this field – including proper command and control procedures, adequate training, and maximum security.

The Evolution of French Nuclear Policy

Even though they do not use the expression “tailored deterrence”, the French have adapted their deterrent posture so as to be able to adapt the deterrent threat to the stakes involved.⁸

The need for increased flexibility in nuclear options was first recognized publicly in the mid-1990s, under the presidency of Jacques Chirac.

A major defense review took place in 1995. The French government decided to build a longer-range submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the M51, in order to allow for broader coverage and to be able to reach distant countries.

A full-scale nuclear policy review took place in the years 1998-2000. Some of its results were announced in a June 2001 speech by Chirac. He said in particular that targeting against a regional power would focus “*in priority on its centers of power, political, economic, and military*”.⁹ Other high-level French officials publicly hinted that the French arsenal had been adapted to allow for targeting of such centers of power.

In January 2006, other adaptations were announced. Chirac said that the number of warheads had been reduced on some of the existing SLBMs. He also indicated that State-sponsored terrorism and threats against strategic supplies would not necessarily be excluded from the

⁸ A more common expression in French strategic circles is *dissuasion adaptée* (“adapted deterrence”).

⁹ *Discours de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, à l’occasion de la clôture de la 53^{ème} session de l’Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale, Paris, 8 June 2001.*

scope of France's vital interests (French doctrine holds that an attack against the nation's vital interests would trigger a nuclear response.). Finally, he referred to missile defense in a more positive way than in the past, noting that it could be a useful "*complement*" to deterrence through the threat of nuclear retaliation.¹⁰ A few days later, an unnamed high-level official briefed a number of reporters on the fact that France had included in its menu of nuclear strike options a high-altitude shot designed to exploit electro-magnetic pulse (EMP) effects.¹¹

In March 2008, President Nicolas Sarkozy confirmed the broad orientations of French nuclear policy and doctrine. He stated that "*for deterrence to be credible, the Head of State has to have at his disposal a large range of options to face the threats. Our nuclear forces have been adapted to that effect. They will continue to be*". He reaffirmed that France would continue to rely on two different nuclear systems, and noted that the characteristics in terms of range and accuracy of these two systems (the M51 SLBM and a new air-breathing system, the ASMPA) made them complementary to each other.¹² Sarkozy also confirmed that the French nuclear deterrent would be valid "*wherever the threat would come from and whatever its form*", thus implicitly confirming the continued validity of Chirac's statements. He also implied that the "centers of power" targeting criterion would be valid whatever the adversary – thus breaking with the traditional distinction made in French official language between "major powers" and "regional powers".¹³ He mentioned the traditional "warning shot" concept – an option that has existed in the French doctrine since the early 1970s – but did not call it, as has usually been the case, a

¹⁰ *Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, lors de sa visite aux forces aériennes et océanique stratégique, Landivisiau / l'Île Longue, 19 January 2006.*

¹¹ See Jean Guisnel, "Armement nucléaire: innovation française", *Le Point*, 9 February 2006.

¹² The M51 is an intercontinental-class submarine-launched ballistic missile. The ASMPA (Air-Sol Moyenne Portée, Amélioré) is a shorter-range air-launched cruise missile. In his 2008 speech, Sarkozy announced a reduction by a third of the air-based component. This reduction was primarily driven by the increased capabilities of the ASMPA as compared with those of its predecessor, the ASMP (Air-Sol Moyenne Portée).

¹³ Specifically, Sarkozy said that the French nuclear force would target "*in priority the political, economic and military centers of power*". *Discours de M. le Président de la République à l'occasion de la présentation du SNLE Le Terrible, Cherbourg, 21 March 2008.*

“final warning”.¹⁴ No explanation was given as to whether this was a significant doctrinal development (allowing the repetition of a nuclear warning, if necessary) or just a name change. Finally, he mentioned, as Chirac had done in 2006, that France views missile defense against a “*limited strike*” as a useful complement to nuclear deterrence.

The French continue to have a fairly conservative approach to the concept of deterrence in general. (To Gallic ears, the word “deterrence” generally means “nuclear deterrence”.) However, there is no doubt that these changes and adjustments have made the French nuclear deterrent much more flexible than in the past, allowing for effective “tailored” deterrence.

Tailored Nuclear Deterrence and the Atlantic Alliance

There has thus been a growing nuclear consensus within NATO among the three Alliance nuclear powers – starting with the adoption of the 1999 Strategic Concept, and moving on to adaptations made to the British and French doctrines. In particular, the British and French doctrines seem hardly distinguishable one from another. (Where these two countries differ from the United States is essentially on the more central role given by them to nuclear deterrence, as opposed to conventional options and missile defense.)

At the same time, many non-nuclear NATO members are weary of the absence of progress towards nuclear disarmament. Germany, Norway, the Netherlands and Canada are among the Alliance members most vocal about the need to go forward in that direction. The United Kingdom, for its part, plays a delicate balancing act: it has decided in principle to renew its Trident system but has also strongly reaffirmed its commitment to the goal of complete nuclear disarmament.

An interesting conjunction of events is appearing on the horizon. The next NPT Review Conference will take place in 2010. Many Western nations will want progress on nuclear disarmament to ensure the contin-

¹⁴ Sarkozy mentioned a “*nuclear warning*” that would be aimed at “*restoring deterrence*” (Ibid.).

uation of the treaty's validity and legitimacy. Immediately afterwards (2011-2013), construction of the U.S. missile defense site in Central Europe is due to be finished, and other NATO missile defense programs should come to fruition. Around 2015-2020, many NATO nuclear-capable bomber aircraft, which can carry US B-61 gravity bombs, will have to be replaced.¹⁵

This arsenal allows for “tailoring” deterrence options both at the political level and at the strategic level.

However, so far, most European “host” nations (those who have a nuclear role) have postponed decisions about paying the additional costs needed to give a nuclear capability to the *Eurofighter* or the *Joint Strike Fighter* (JSF). Given that Europe should then be protected by U.S. missile defenses, some countries might consider a termination of the ability for the five European countries to deliver nuclear weapons.

This would not necessarily mean the end of nuclear burden-sharing. The United States might, for example, retain a number of nuclear weapons in some of these countries – perhaps only in the United Kingdom and Turkey – for use exclusively by US air forces.

Such a decision could form the basis of a new nuclear policy consensus within the Alliance. However, it would also reduce NATO's ability to tailor deterrence at the political level, since a hypothetical NATO nuclear threat would only involve US nuclear bombers (possibly accompanied by European aircraft in support roles).

Any decision to further reduce the US nuclear presence in Europe should thus be carefully pondered. Only the prospects of great, tangible benefits in the realm of disarmament and non-proliferation would warrant such a decision.

¹⁵ According to open sources, the US continues to station a number of B-61 gravity bombs in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and the United Kingdom, for use by US and European aircraft (except for the UK, where they are reserved for US use).

France is not directly involved in this debate, since its nuclear force is not formally assigned to NATO and there is no French presence in the Nuclear Planning Group.¹⁶ However, Paris will probably have to take a stance on the issue of the US nuclear weapons presence in Europe, given its rapprochement with NATO and its participation in missile defense programs.

¹⁶ A French return to the NATO integrated military structure would probably not alter this situation.