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French Military Reforms and Strategy

by Ronald Tiersky

Conclusions:

French military downsizing and reconfiguring is part of a NATO-wide trend. All French forces, including the nuclear force de frappe, are affected. Three factors are shaping French and European post-Cold War militaries: 1) disappearance of the Soviet Union; 2) budgetary pressures, especially competition between security needs and European integration needs (meeting the Maastricht "Convergence Criteria"); and 3) new missions replacing the Cold War outlook.

The military issue for France is whether the planned, professionalized, rapid-reaction forces will be adequate to post-Cold War missions, or whether downsizing and budget problems will result in a hollowed-out military. Success will depend on relaunching strong economic growth and on the Chirac government's determination to see through tensions between security and integration until the single European currency is launched and less constrained budgetary times return.

Maastricht Economics and Chirac's Military Reform

Jacques Chirac's succession of Socialist Francois Mitterrand as the president of France in May 1995 raised questions as to what balance of continuity and change there would be in French foreign and security policy, as well as in France's European integration policies. Similarities and differences between neo-Gaullist and Socialist policies sometimes are not what stereotypes would indicate.

On the one hand, Mitterrand's European security and European integration policies turned out, from the beginning, to be quite realistic-leading to much more continuity than many had expected. On the other hand, Gaullism has always been more an attitude than a policy; Chirac's neo-Gaullist policy, like de Gaulle's own, is a remarkably flexible pragmatism sitting atop a few basic principles, above all the pursuit of national interest.

Chirac, for example, has surprised stereotyped expectations that a neo-Gaullist would naturally back away from European integration. Having campaigned in 1995 on a "national" platform promising that unemployment would be his "priority of priorities," Chirac has instead maintained Mitterrand's hard choice of austerity and a "strong Franc," meaning belt-tightening domestic suffering in order to meet "convergence criteria" requirements for joining in the single European currency. A traditional "statist" and "national" policy of deficit-spending to create jobs would increase inflation, the budget deficit and the national debt, making French Single European Currency membership problematic. Not surprisingly, the popularity of Chirac and Prime Minister Alain Juppe's is very low, not least of all because of the

French government's "Bundesbank policy."

These European integration factors are connected to Chirac's military reforms and his turn toward the NATO command in European security policy. Chirac's downsizing and reconfiguration of French military forces, and his turning toward the integrated command-long recommended by military leaders themselves, (who realized how much technology and training the French military missed by being outside)-was provoked by the need to finance Maastricht commitments. It was also a reaction to inadequate French military performance in the Gulf war and in Bosnia, where French technology, weaponry, interoperability and the conscription army's constraints all caused problems. Chirac has launched a wholesale recasting of French defense, military and security policies which Mitterrand had only begun. Examples of Mitterrand's intentions are the European agreements to build advanced satellite intelligence capabilities and a large European transport aircraft-both designed to reduce Europe's dependence on U.S. assets.

Mitterrand's Nuclear Moratorium and Chirac's Last Round of Tests

Just weeks after taking office, determined to relaunch French defense efforts, Chirac broke with Mitterrand's moratorium on nuclear testing. A series of six underground tests was opposed by worldwide protests against "arrogant" French nuclear explosions. This included much-resented criticism from most of France's EU partners, although the British and Germans publicly kept silent.

The tests, in isolated territories of French Polynesia, had from the beginning been conceived, but badly explained as, France's last tests. The point was to end the need for live tests by perfecting software for laboratory simulations, as the United States had already done. This would ensure, without live testing, reliability of the force de frappe in the long term.

Completion of the tests in time for Chirac's state visit to the United States in early January 1996 allowed the French president to tell a joint session of Congress that France was ready to lead the diplomatic fight, with the United States, for a comprehensive test-ban treaty (CTBT). France, given certain guarantees by the United States, also accepted a provision prohibiting even very low-yield testing, under a so-called "zero-yield option." The French worked to get Russia and China to accept this provision as well .

At the UN General Assembly, 158 states voted in favor of the CTBT resolution, while three voted against (India, Libya and Bhutan) and five abstained (including Syria, Lebanon and Cuba). France, Chirac announced, would sign the CTBT on September 24, the earliest day possible, along with the other four declared nuclear powers.

Chirac's Defense and Military Reforms

During his last few years, Mitterrand's attention to French military reform had been piecemeal and the "cohabitation" government led by Eduoard Balladur 1993-95, despite issuing a White Paper, did not make wholesale defense reforms an immediate issue. French military adaptation to post-Cold War conditions lagged behind British and German reforms.

By contrast, the military reform announced by Chirac in February 1996 is a wholesale plan affecting all services and weapons types. The size, capabilities and budget of the French military, including the nuclear force de frappe, are being radically streamlined or reduced. (See chart at right.) And, although Chirac's government is only doing what most NATO and EU states are doing (the United States included)-in France a hugely excessive unemployment rate (over 12 percent) and slow GDP growth

(around 2 percent) for over a decade have exhausted popular patience, with the result that strikes and demonstrations against military downsizing are added to those building in the general economy.

The new reforms were thus not politically easy decisions for Chirac. Downsizing means even more job losses in an economy where sucessive threshholds of "unacceptable" unemployment (first 2 million, then 2,500,000, then 3 million-which is about 12 percent) have been transgressed. Furthermore, because the French military is billeted domestically near towns which have become economically dependent, especially in the "rustbelt" of the north and east, a more significant number of local and regional economies than in other countries will be damaged by military base closings.

The French, with other Europeans, increasingly see "Maastricht" as the cause of unemployment and austerity. Potentially the Single European Currency project (the "Euro," scheduled to appear in 1999) is threatened by growing popular resistance. Furthermore, weak economic growth and smaller tax receipts mean that military reductions, especially joint projects, have had to go further than in a more prosperous economy. In France, Germany and in other European NATO countries, this vicious cycle needs to be broken. The problem is how to relaunch stronger growth while keeping to the Maastricht convergence criteria.

Projected French Armed Forces In 2015

	1995		2015	
ARMY	military civilians total	239,100 32,400 271,500	military civilians total	136,000 34,000 170,000
	9 divisions, 129 regiments 927 heavy tanks 250 light tanks 340 helicopters		66 regiments in 4 forces 420 heavy tanks 250 light tanks 140 helicopters	
NAVY	military civilians total	63,800 6,600 70,400	military civilians total	45,600 11,000 56,600
	101 vessels (-SNLE) with: 2 aircraft carriers & air group 6 SNA, 7 diesel subs, 15 first-rate frigates Tonnage: 316,000 tons 35 sea patrol aircraft		81 vessels (-SNLE) with: 1 or 2 aircraft carriers & air group (+3 Hawkeyes) 6 SNA, 12 first-rate frigates Tonnage 294,000 tons 22 sea patrol aircraft	
AIR FORCE	military civilians total	89,200 4,900 94,100	military civilians total	63,000 7,000 70,000
	405 combat aircraft 86 transport aircraft 11 C135 refuelling aircraft 101 helicopters		300 modern Rafale aircraft 52 modern transport aircraft 15 refuelling aircraft 84 helicopters	
NATIONAL MILITARY POLICE	military civilians total	92,230 1,220 93,450	military civilians total	95,600 2,300 97,900
JOINT SERVICES	military civilians total	18,130 29,780 47,910	military civilians total	12,600 27,000 39,600
STAFF (excl. extra budget accts.)	military civilians total	502,460 74,900 577,360	military civilians total	352,700 81,300 434,000

The New French Military

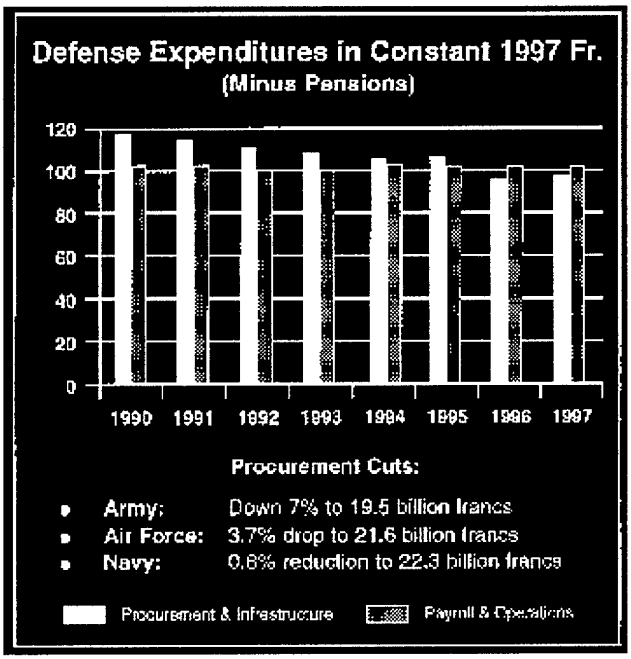
The February 23, 1996 Chirac plan for downsizing and modernizing the French military, when combined with similar British and German plans, outlines what the post-Cold War European military will be. Chirac's model for reform is the British military, which the French president has publicly praised several times. The gap between British and French performances in DESERT STORM was a lesson not lost on the new French president, not to say the French military command.

Chirac's plan calls for moving from a Cold War, central front, defensive army to a rapid-reaction military which can be combined with the British force and a German "quick reaction" conventional force that is also in the works. This fundamental reconfiguration of French military forces, plus the declaration that France is prepared to discuss "all" matters, even nuclear deterrence, with NATO partners, indicates that Chirac is, in principle, serious about France's return to integrated commands, including suitably reformed NATO command institutions. (This last, of course, is the problem). Despite Chirac's NATO-friendly goal, serious and conceivably unbridgeable disagreements (e.g. about the AFSOUTH command in Naples) are in heated negotiation.

The Chirac reform shrinks the uniformed military from about 500,000 to 350,000, or more exactly-excluding the paramilitary gendarmerie-from 400,000 (about 50% being 10-month conscripts) to 250,000. This will constitute a manpower cut of about one-third, and a budget cut of about one-fifth, although some analysts think the new army will be more, not less expensive. This smaller military is to be molded around four elite units with the capacity for rapid deployment abroad, to face the kinds of ad hoc crisis situations that planners foresee as the likeliest job of French soldiers in the post-Cold War world.

Chirac is also abandoning the longstanding Gaullist goal of self-sufficiency in all weapon types, especially in cases where French manufacture has been particularly weak or nonexistent: satellite intelligence; command, control and communications equipment; and strategic lift. There are also projects such as satellite intelligence (the Helios project) that the French want to do only with Europeans, thus creating a European capability independent of U.S. assets.

This, in turn, drives a restructuring of the arms industry, with several state-sponsored mergers of nationalized and private-sector companies. But French government repositionings, some budget driven, have created serious Franco-German conflicts in combined projects. French arms exports will likely also suffer, adding to unemployment and balance of trade difficulties.



Professionalization and French "Normalization"

The French military reform is to stretch from the soldier to the nuclear deterrent. Professionalizing the military means, first of all, a long-debated abandonment of conscription. Considering French history, this should have raised more controversy than it did, given historical, social and ideological commitment on both right and left to conscription as patriotic, republican and egalitarian. Opinion polls, however, find that almost 70 percent of respondents favor an end to conscription-another instance of declining ideological attachments in today's "normalized" France. An all-volunteer French army is to be achieved by 2002.

Change in Adversary, Change in Force Structure

Conventional French military strategy is being reoriented from its Cold War emphasis on defense of the central front in a divided Europe toward an idea of general security problems, including terrorism. For example, the much-criticized Eurocorps, theoretically operational since 1995 as a classic conventional force whose purpose is strategic defense, may-after its inauspicious beginning-become the core of an after-IFOR force. The Chirac plan is not a mere shrinkage of numbers and budgets, but part of a cooperative allied restructuring of major EU military capabilities in which post-Cold War national force levels, capabilities and strategies are being, in theory, harmonized-made more complementary and, more Europeanized.

The Less Shiny Causes of Reform

The less shiny causes of downsizing are also clear: (1) France, like other European powers, simply cannot afford a full-range military operation; and (2) in the 1991 Gulf War the French learned difficult and humiliating lessons about their military insufficiencies.

France had trouble mustering about 12,000 troops for DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM, whereas British forces were double that size and quicker to deploy, despite the overall smaller size of the United Kingdom army. The French were also much less effective in fighting terms, unable, for example,

to fly night fighterbomber raids for lack of night radar. French units were obliged to rely on American logistics and intelligence.

By 2002 a French battle force of 50-60,000 troops is to be deployable-quickly and at distance. No more will the "typical" French military operation consist of a few hundred soldiers jerry-dispatched to former French Africa to put down a coup d'etat, or to help replace a president. Germany, as noted above, is also developing a "crisis reaction force," about 55,000 strong, to be in place by 1999. With the British and perhaps other smaller, similar EU forces, a rapid reaction post-Cold War European military force of perhaps 250,000 is envisageable in the medium term.

Even the politically-sacrosanct French force de frappe has not been spared. The 18 land-based Albion Plateau (Provence) land-based missles were closed up in the summer of 1996. One leg of the French nuclear triad, albeit the least useful, has thus been simply amputated, along with the old doctrine that France would not deny itself any kind of weapon possessed by another state. Air-launched missles and, most important, its nuclear submarines will remain. But one fewer will be built, leaving, early in the next century, a fleet of four submarines as opposed to the five scheduled under Mitterrand. Chirac also decided, as a goodwill gesture to German sensibilities, to dismantle France's short-range Had(s missles. Mitterrand, as his good-will gesture, had had them stored but not destroyed.

Not Just Camouflage

President Chirac's military reform plan is not a camouflaged scheme to allow military effectiveness and military self-esteem to just slip softly into the night. Chirac is deeply committed on military and security matters. Yet there are questions about whether money, procurement and armament quality will be adequate for the kind of force and assignments envisaged. Whether budget constraints, competing needs, technological inadequacies and the availability of U.S. and other European force elements will result in a hollowed-out force worse than what showed up in the Gulf War and Bosnia, rather than the leaner and meaner French military hoped for, is up to Chirac's vision, leadership and his nation's economy.

This paper concerns France's military reform and changing defense and security outlook. Another paper, focusing on France and the new NATO, is planned. The author, Ronald Tiersky, is the Eastman Professor of Politics at Amherst College. Currently he is a visiting fellow at Institute for National Strategic Studies. For more information he can be reached by calling 202-685-2199, or by fax at 202-685-3972.

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