French Nuclear Deterrence According to President Chirac: Reform, Clean Break or Reminder?

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Theme: This ARI analyses the speech by French President Jacques Chirac on January 19, 2006, at the Île Longue base in Brest, Finisterre, on the subject of France's nuclear deterrence doctrine. The purpose is to determine whether or not the speech contains doctrinal changes and whether it may be interpreted as a veiled threat to Iran.

Summary: During his visit to the strategic installations in Brest on January 19, 2006, French President Jacques Chirac defended the continued value of nuclear deterrence in the face of the uncertainty of international security, the possibility of strategic surprises, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and other new threats to France's vital interests. He went as far as to indicate that potential targets of nuclear retaliation included states that make use of terrorism and those that consider using weapons of mass destruction in any way against France, be they major or regional powers.

Nuclear deterrence is a taboo subject and does not often appear in the news media. Those responsible for nuclear policy avoid making statements on it –in particular, detailed ones–. Given the backdrop of the worsening crisis surrounding Iran's nuclear programmes, it is no surprise that Chirac's detailed speech has made the headlines throughout the international press. According to how various parts of the speech are combined it can be construed that French deterrence seems to have been modified to permit the use of nuclear weapons –including a first strike option– against terrorists, regional powers or the fanatical leaders who support them. His comments merit more detailed commentary and this ARI takes a look at the strategic and political content of the speech to determine whether it indicates continuity or a break with previous doctrine, or if it simply serves as a veiled threat against Iran in the midst of the current crisis.

Analysis: *The Development of French Nuclear Deterrence Doctrine*
The essentials of France's nuclear doctrine have not changed since its 1972 White Book: the prevention of war, the defence of vital interests and strict sufficiency of means. France designed its nuclear strategy in the 1960s in order to safeguard its ability to make independent decisions, protect its vital interests and inflict serious damage on any aggressor. The credibility of its deterrence depended on potential aggressors appreciating France's capacity and will to use its nuclear arsenal. This necessitated effective nuclear forces and a doctrine governing their use. Most of these factors are common to all nuclear powers, but France's particular perspective should be briefly explained.

France has always maintained both its desire not to use nuclear weapons and its right to do so if at any time this is necessary for self-defence, in accordance with article 51 of the United Nations Charter. France has always believed that the simple possession of nuclear weapons acts in itself as a deterrent (existential deterrence) that prevents aggression

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against its vital interests. However, if necessary, it has been (and remains) ready to use them from the start –that is, as a first strike–. Unlike the US and Britain, France does not contemplate the gradual or 'pre-strategic' use of nuclear weapons, but rather a crushing strategic response. Faced with an overwhelmingly superior nuclear power such as the former Soviet Union, deterrence was by necessity asymmetrical *–du faible au forte–* and aimed at preventing aggression by threatening to inflict unacceptable damage that would offset anything the aggressor could hope to gain. Therefore, it was necessary to have only enough nuclear weapons to give a 'final warning' to military aggressors and then launch an attack that would cause serious damage in the aggressor's home territory (*strategie anti-cités*). With this doctrine, France did not need nuclear weapons as numerous or sophisticated as those of its allies, since they would not be used in a flexible or gradual exchange, nor would they be used against rival nuclear forces (*strategie anti-forces*).

France has always been careful not to reveal if such damage would be aimed at the enemy's nuclear forces, property or people, nor has it given a detailed list of the vital interests that could be protected by a nuclear response. Uncertainty is an essential part of deterrence and France has avoided facilitating information that potential aggressors could use to calculate France's choice of military or civilian targets, and its list of vital or non-vital interests. The exact timing of nuclear retaliation is another part of the uncertainty game. In France, this decision depends on the president of the Republic making a personal decision that there has been an aggression against France's vital interests. Therefore, any potential aggressor would have to be aware of the current definition of these interests and the sensitivity of the current president. Finally, France has always carefully maintained its ability to make independent decisions and not subordinate this ability even to its allies. This adds further complexity to the situation.

The new strategic context after the end of the Cold War affected the relevance of nuclear deterrence to French national defence, both because the threat that justified it had vanished and because great technological and budgetary efforts were needed to keep it up to date. Since then, France has followed a mixed policy of reduction and modernisation as regards the technology of its deterrent force, and of continuity and adaptation in its underlying doctrine.

France overhauled its nuclear programmes between 1989 and 1992. Since 1990, the French government has reduced its nuclear weapons by half and its nuclear warheads by a third (to about 350 at present), while reducing its budget by half (9.5% of the defence budget in 2004), based on the principle of 'strict sufficiency'. In 1996, it cancelled its testing programme in the Pacific and dismantled its auxiliary installations and its land-based nuclear systems. France maintains a simulation programme (without nuclear testing) to guarantee its continued deterrence capacity, and cooperates with the UK and the US on technological and operational issues. The reduction process continues and, under the latest Law on Military Planning for 2003-08, by 2010 France will have submarines (SNLE-NG) armed with the new M51 strategic missiles and, by 2007, enhanced (ASM-P) air-ground missiles for its Mirage 2000N and Rafale fighter jets.

The 1994 White Book marked the beginning of a review of doctrine aimed at adapting it to strategic changes. The basic principles of deterrence were kept in place, but a call was made for flexible and diversified resources to adapt to the new realities and provide more strategic options. In 1997, France deprogrammed its fixed nuclear targets and replaced its 'weak vs strong' deterrence strategy for a '*tous azimuts*' strategy that could be aimed at

anyone, regardless of the level of nuclear threat. This meant that 'strong' nuclear powers continued to be targeted for deterrence, but also that other smaller nuclear powers were no longer excluded. This was justified by the emergence of phenomena such as the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (already mentioned in the 1994 White Book) and the strategic vectors of these weapons, as spelt out by Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in 1999.

From 1999 to 2001, the Defence Council carried out a broad review of French strategic doctrine. The results were presented by President Chirac to the *Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale (IEHDN)* in Paris on June 8, 2001, as part of a general presentation on defence policy. The mention of nuclear deterrence indicated continuity in the essential aspects of the role of French military strategy: guaranteeing the survival of the nation in the face of a threat, preventing blackmail by a smaller nuclear power and contributing to European and transatlantic security. Meanwhile, certain doctrinal novelties went unnoticed by the general public and the media. First of all, coherent with the new omnidirectional strategy, President Chirac added to the list of targets for deterrence: in addition to the traditional powers, he included new regional powers with weapons of mass destruction and states that were developing vectors or weapons of mass destruction that one day could threaten European territory. These potential targets of French nuclear deterrence were also included in the president's latest speech, in which he warned all possible aggressors that he –as '*ultime gardien de la disuassion*'– would not hesitate to use nuclear retaliation to defend vital interests '*en priorité sur ses centres du povouir politique, économique et militaire*'.

Preference for these targets did not rule out other options, but the policy was difficult to follow in view of the lack of flexibility of the nuclear forces, which made it impracticable to select targets, particularly within large urban areas. Hence, the president justified the future modernisation of France's nuclear arsenal because of the need to have the capacity to reach such targets. Since that speech, the strategic community began to read between the lines in search of changes in doctrine and technology that would make this flexibility feasible. In the autumn of 2003, some French news media, including *Libération* and *Le Point,* announced that the French government was modifying its nuclear doctrine to cover irresponsible (*vojoux*) states, although both the president and his defence minister denied this categorically. The minister herself, Michéle Alliot-Marie, at the IEHDN on February 2, 2004, denied that such modifications were being studied. By way of example, she said that the miniaturisation of French nuclear weapons had been rejected, because this would lead to a revision of the doctrine governing their use. However, she did confirm the need for flexible and diversified systems to avoid 'all-or-nothing' situations that would make nuclear deterrence less credible. She continued in the same line in a speech to the National Assembly on November 17, 2004, when she admitted that the availability 'of precision weapons, capable of striking at centres of power with very little collateral damage' would increase the credibility of the doctrine of nuclear deterrence.[1]

In his latest speech, devoted entirely to nuclear deterrence, President Chirac largely reiterated the same ideas he expressed five years ago, but with a new feature: the concept of vital interests has been broadened to include strategic supplies and the defence of allied countries. The speech has attracted the attention of the news media and the strategic community because France reproached the United States for this same doctrine during the

[1] Assemble Nationale, *Journal Officiel de la République Française*, Débats Parlementaires, 17/XI/2004, 9485.

invasion of Iraq. Also, by no longer limiting its allies to countries in Europe and the Atlantic region, France has increased the number of possible scenarios for military engagement. Less attention has been given to the express recognition that French nuclear weapons have already been made somewhat more flexible. Since the great technological and budgetary effort put into nuclear modernisation was meant to justify greater flexibility, it seems reasonable that some progress has been made, but no details on payloads, precision or range are available. However, the president did mention that the number of nuclear warheads had been reduced on some missiles, thus reducing their collateral effect and making it possible to pinpoint certain targets, thereby increasing the credibility of the use of nuclear weapons.

Strategic Repercussions
The president's speech and the doctrinal interpretations he expressed have led to questions regarding their content and appropriateness. His statements and the debates arising from them have a domestic audience –the beneficiaries– and a foreign one –the potential targets of nuclear retaliation–. The question is which audience his speech was aimed at. Upholding the need for a French deterrent could be seen from the perspective of domestic politics: that is, a bid to gain support for the maintenance of strategic forces to deal with new threats and missions, despite the growing economic and political costs. For lack of a clear threat to justify it, nuclear deterrence will fall on hard times starting in 2007, when President Chirac, a firm believer, leaves the Elysée Palace and his successor will have to deal with the new Law on Military Planning. Focusing on the issue now may help maintain France's desire to be a nuclear[2] power and would explain the purpose of the speech at the national level.

By recognising options mid-way between all or nothing, the debate is now open on the possibility of deploying and using the new weapons. The president insisted in his speech that flexibility does not mean military (pre-strategic) use of nuclear weapons, but rather the traditional strategy of crushing retaliation. However, the availability of more flexible nuclear weapons and the restatement of the concept of using them as an '*ultime avertissement*' is closer to the pre-strategic use defended by the US and the UK than to the strategic ideas of traditional French doctrine. British doctrine also allows the sub-strategic use of missiles on board submarines –which Chirac mentioned in his speech– while France also has airborne ASM-P missiles, which the British do not have.

Another repercussion to consider is the preventative use of nuclear weapons. Despite the headlines, President Chirac has not expressly accepted either the use of nuclear weapons for a preventative strike or their use in the fight against terrorism. What he has acknowledged is that prevention alone is not enough –to think so would be an '*angélisme*'– and that both conventional and nuclear forces are still necessary if prevention fails. And it is the president who decides whether vital interests have been attacked and whether to use nuclear deterrence as '*l'expression ultime*' of prevention. For prevention to work, the strategic community recommends diversifying responses with a variety of anti-proliferation instruments (arms control, disarmament, international agreements, defence against missiles of different kinds and results management) and deterrence (intelligence and nuclear and conventional attacks). France shares this idea, but has developed some of its options more than others. While it actively supports all international programmes and forums for arms control and disarmament, France has ruled out equipping itself with anti-

[2] David Yost (2005), "New Approaches to Deterrence in Britain, France and the United States", *International Affairs*, vol. 81, nr 1, p. 83-114.

missile defence systems. As for the preventive use of nuclear and conventional weapons, France does not explicitly accept this idea, as the US National Security Strategy does, or as the New Chapter of the British Strategic Defence Review implicitly does. French doctrine accepts only conventional weapons for a first strike in legitimate defence –with all the built-in precautions that set France apart from the US in the Iraq War–.

The president expressly acknowledged that this will not deter fanatical terrorists, but as he did five years ago, he warned the states that support them or that are involved in proliferation programmes that they are exposing themselves to an 'energetic and appropriate' response. In this regard, French doctrine has also begun to align itself with its British counterpart. This certainly is the first time that an explicit link has been made between a nuclear response and state support for terrorists or terrorist strikes against France. Since this possibility was already covered implicitly, and since it is not usual to give so much detail on deterrence, this linkage seems likely to have a specific justification. It could be interpreted as a move towards the US and British tendency to personalise responsibility for proliferation, identifying specific leaders, states and groups. If they cannot deter non-state actors who violate international law, the US and the UK –and now France– believe these actors should be prosecuted under international criminal law or, failing that, be subject to military action –against their centres of power, according to the French version–.

Another factor that suggests that France is turning towards the practices of its US and British allies is that it has withdrawn its negative guarantees regarding the security of states involved in the proliferation of any kind of weapons of mass destruction. France, as a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has promised not to use its nuclear arsenal against non-nuclear states that have signed the treaty. However (and also following the lead of the UK and the US), France has expressed its reluctance to apply this guarantee to member states involved in pursuing nuclear capability –such as Iran– and to those developing chemical or biological weapons.

The Deeper Iranian Issue
The speech did not mention Iran, but because this crisis is so immediate, Iran is mentioned in every list of countries that spread radical ideas, every list of emerging powers that rely on weapons of mass destruction and every list of states tempted to acquire nuclear capability in violation of the non-proliferation agreements. Iran is not being singled out by chance: Although the Iranian crisis may be only a detailed illustration that does not test the limits of the doctrine, the lessons France has learned will certainly lead to changes in doctrine in the short term.

On January 10, 2006, Iran broke the seals that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) had put at the entrance to the Natanz nuclear installations, where uranium can be enriched. This situation was reached after a long effort by France to find a negotiated solution to the crisis, rather than falling back on coercion, such as sanctions or military force. Iran's unilateral decision slammed the door shut on the European negotiating strategy (France, Germany and Britain form the EU-3 *trirectoire*, with the participation of the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy [PESC]) and, when the US strategy was finally accepted, it became clear the French approach had failed.

In August 2002, after leaks revealing the existence of secret uranium enrichment installations in Arak and Natanz, Iran had no choice but to admit (in 2003) that it had

concealed information from the IAEA and violated its safeguard regime. At the time, France opted to maintain the multilateral framework for discussions, instead of going directly to the Security Council for sanctions, as the US requested. The 'French way' has been able to keep the negotiations going, but has not been able to achieve the desired results: Iran has been persuaded to sign agreements –from October 2003 to November 15, 2004 in Paris– but has systematically failed to comply with them while it gained time.

The IAEA's inspection unit has spent three years trying to verify the peaceful nature of Iran's uranium enrichment programme –and possible related arms programmes– without reaching any reassuring conclusions. The agency's inspectors continue to work on-site, sometimes with Iranian cooperation –including voluntary authorisations for immediate, unscheduled on-site inspections– and sometimes without cooperation, for example, in the case of the installations at Lavizan, which were buried before inspectors could take soil samples. Under these conditions, the international agency cannot certify the peaceful nature of the programme (with March 6 looming as the deadline) and now has authorisation from its governing council to send the Iranian file to the United Nations Security Council. The Iranian attitude compromises France's support of IAEO multilateralism and presents France with the dilemma of what to do when multilateralism is not effective.

On January 12, 2006, the EU-3 ministers of foreign affairs met in Berlin to coordinate the transfer of the problem to the Security Council. This decision became an ultimatum to Iran after another meeting in London on January 17, one day before a joint meeting with Russia, China and the US, also in London, after which Iran was requested to stop nuclear research immediately. Chirac's speech came close on the heels of these events, a fact that cannot be ignored; neither can the fact that French diplomacy has been impotent in the face Iranian arrogance. Both the text and subtext of the president's speech reflect numerous elements of the current crisis. However, this will likely increase in future documents, when France's deterrence doctrine increasingly converges with the criteria and practices of its American and British allies.

Conclusions: As the history of French nuclear deterrence during the Cold War shows, nuclear weapons can act as deterrents when their design is appropriate to the scenario in which they could be used. When the scenario changes, various responses must be tested, even at the risk of error, until the right one –or the right combination of responses– is found. Just as the other two nuclear powers have met with both success and failure in the Middle East, the French strategy of using diplomacy to deal with Iranian proliferation has revealed its possibilities and limitations. The time has now come to evaluate the lessons learned and correct the mistakes. Those who opted for a negotiated solution instead of coercion have used moral and legal arguments to take Iran to the UN Security Council, while Iran has taken advantage of these years of negotiations to arm itself with nuclear weapons. The best-case scenario is that Iran will have these weapons in a matter of years (by 2010), in the opinion of the Institute for Strategic Studies in London; in the worst case, it is a question of only months, according to IAEA Director General and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Mohamed el Baradei. The Iranian issue will, in all likelihood, now be passed on to the Security Council. Will its permanent members have learned the lessons of Iraq?