

The French White Paper on Defence and National Security: Towards a Stronger and More Streamlined Force (ARI)

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Theme¹: The President of the French Republic, Nicolas Sarkozy, presented a new and far-reaching White Paper on Security and Defence on 17 July 2008.

Summary: France has always been more revolutionary-minded than reform-minded. This is also true in the field of defence, where, rather than incremental changes, drastic moves are implemented every decade or so. The last time France had embarked on far-reaching changes was during the years 1994-96, with the publication of a new White Paper and then, after the election of President Chirac, full-scale professionalisation of the armed forces along with the adoption of a new defence plan for 2015. It was widely expected that any new President elected in 2007 would initiate a defence review. What was not pre-ordained, however, was that the changes stemming from that review would be at least as deep and far-reaching as those of the mid-1990s.

The changes announced in June 2008 include: (1) adopting a broad conception of 'national security' that includes both defence against external threats and homeland security management; (2) reducing the overall number of defence personnel; (3) increasing equipment budgets in order to ensure force coherence; (4) placing a greater emphasis on intelligence in order to be better prepared for strategic surprises; (5) increasing the role of the French Parliament; and (6) recognising that full re-integration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) could indirectly contribute to the development of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

Analysis: On 23 August 2007, President Sarkozy installed the 35-member Commission in charge of drafting the White Paper. His instructions were to have a 'no-taboo' approach in adapting the French security apparatus to 21st century threats and risks, while maintaining the defence budget at around 2% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Half of the Commission was made up of senior administration staff and the other half of 'civil society' representatives, including security experts, academics from several different fields and other non-expert personalities able to bring a fresh perspective to the security debate. Most remarkably, it included four parliamentarians from both the majority party and the opposition –a break in traditional French practice, according to which the legislative branch takes a back seat in defence decision-making–. The breadth and scope of the

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¹ The views expressed here are solely the author's.

Commission's work was in no small part due to the personality of its Chairman, Jean-Claude Mallet, a high-level, non-partisan and hard-working civil servant with wide experience of the defence and security bureaucracy. Mallet had been the key drafter of the previous *White Paper* (1993-94) and headed a 20-person team devoted exclusively to the Commission's work.

When the Commission began its work, there were, broadly speaking, two possible conceptions of what a White Paper could be. One was a short, political document affirming the main principles upon which national security organisation, structures and procedures should be devised. The other was a much longer and in-depth document suggesting specific and detailed changes. This second school of thought won the day.

While the Commission was independent, it had to ensure that its proposals would be adopted and implemented by the French political authorities. This was made possible by resorting to an interactive process: there were several meetings between the Commission and the Elysée, and at each point in the process the President was asked for guidance, or choice between several options. This ensured that at the end of the day he was easily able to make the White Paper his own.

The Commission met every week for a session of at least three hours, with additional sessions in smaller formats as required, as well as several day-long brainstorming 'seminars', from September 2007 to June 2008. It started its work by auditing the system and listening to testimonies and personal experiences. Among the military, the voices that were heard by the Commission ranged from privates in the field to five-star generals. This first part of the process was a novelty for France, where key political decisions, in particular in this field, are often taken under a veil of secrecy. No less than 52 public hearings were conducted, to which should be added more informal meetings in smaller formats. A website for public discussion of some of the main issues received more than 250,000 visits.

The next phase was conducted in working groups, which included staff from relevant departments, including various ministries and intelligence services.

As early as December 2007, two decisions were announced by the Elysée. One was to merge two presidential-level institutions, the Defence Council and the more recent Domestic Security Council, into a single body –an idea that had been around for several months already but to which the Commission wholeheartedly subscribed to–. The other decision, which resulted directly from the Commission's work, was to approve a new hierarchy of defence roles and missions: (1) knowledge and anticipation; (2) prevention; (3) nuclear deterrence; (4) protection; and (5) intervention. This replaced 'deterrence, prevention, projection, protection', which had been the organising principles of France's defence doctrine since 1996.

The issue of the place and role of nuclear deterrence, which takes up about 20% of the French defence equipment budget, was tackled fairly early on. It was decided by the Commission that continuity should prevail, with minor adjustments in doctrine and force posture. President Sarkozy made a major speech about nuclear deterrence on 21 March 2008. After the working groups completed their initial reports, two parallel processes began. One was the review by the Commission of these reports. Another was the study of 'scenarios', or crisis situations, that the French security apparatus should be able to

confront, in order to list specific capabilities that were needed and to identify shortcomings.

In the early spring, the confrontation of capabilities and budgets began in earnest. There were heated debates pitting the Directorate of the Budget –in charge of the coherence of State public spending and the balance (to the extent possible) of the State's income and expenditure– against the Joint Staff of the Ministry of Defence –whose task is preparing the draft military programme laws, or five-year defence procurement plans–. To be sure, the presidential commitment to keeping the defence budget at 'around 2% of GDP' left ample scope for manoeuvre –especially since there are many different ways to interpret what the budget actually is–.² At the end of the day, however, there was a strong majority view that the defence budget had to be exempted from the overall cuts in the national budget –especially as the overall size of defence personnel was to be reduced–. The cuts made reflected both the Commission's work and a parallel process called *Revue Générale des Politiques Publiques* (RGPP) or General Review of Public Policies, which affected all government departments with a view to rationalising government spending. There was an interaction between the two processes, which were, so to say, 'separate but not separable'.

The Outcome of the Process: A New White Paper on Security and Defence for France

The White Paper was published on 13 June 2008 –a 336-page volume, with a companion document which included the text of all public hearings conducted by the Commission (http://www.defense.gouv.fr/livre_blanco)–. It begins with a new analysis of the current and foreseeable strategic context. It recognises that this context has seen positive changes since 1994, such as a growing proportion of democracies in the world and a downward trend in the number of major armed conflicts. However, it foresees a more complex environment, where risks and threats are more diverse and where the distinctions between external and internal security, as well as between intentional and non-intentional catastrophes, might become increasingly blurred (for instance, coping with a major health crisis might often require the same kind of means regardless of whether it results from a global pandemic or from a bio-terrorist attack). It also acknowledges that major armed conflicts in the Middle East or in Asia might occur during the time period which the White Paper takes as its horizon. Most importantly, it requires that the possibility of 'strategic surprises' be considered a key feature of the international environment. It recognises that jihadism and the effects of proliferation will continue to affect the security of Europe.

For 2025, the White Paper foresees a world still largely dominated by the US but where Asian powers will have grown in importance and where regional conflicts might occur without much warning and might be difficult to control. It considers that the world's security, and thus Europe's, could be dramatically affected by changes and possibly conflicts in that part of the world. Nevertheless, the priority for prevention and intervention is given to an area ranging from the Western Atlantic to Southern Asia ('from Dakar to Peshawar') –given that most of the immediate security challenges for France might originate in that part of the world–.

² Key issues in the French context include whether or not to include pensions, and whether or not to include all costs related with the *Gendarmerie Nationale* (which despite its military status mostly plays a role similar to that of the police –a justification for its transfer to the Interior Ministry, which had been decided in 2006–).

As stated, the White Paper gives priority to 'knowledge and anticipation', logically concluding that a more unpredictable world requires an additional investment in intelligence. A new National Intelligence Council (*Conseil National du Renseignement*), chaired by the President himself, is meant to ensure better co-ordination between the various services. A new position of National Intelligence Coordinator (*Coordonnateur National du Renseignement*) is also created. The budget for space-based intelligence capabilities is to be doubled.

The 'prevention' strategy rests in no small part on the presence of French security forces outside the metropolitan territory. These are to be deeply restructured. In overseas departments and territories, a number of military forces are to be replaced by *Gendarmerie* and police capabilities with the notable exception of French Guiana, due to its strategic importance as the main European space launch platform. The permanent French presence in countries with which Paris has defence agreements is to be revamped, in line with President Sarkozy's new policy of reviewing all security commitments towards Africa. Only two permanent bases will remain in Africa, one on each seaboard, while another is to be set up in the United Arab Emirates.

'Deterrence', which has to be understood here as 'nuclear deterrence', remains a key pillar of French security strategy, especially in light of the growing nuclear and ballistic capabilities in Asia and the Middle East. Modernisation plans were not affected by the White Paper. The air-leg base of the French dyad was reduced by a third, a change made possible by the improved capabilities of the weapon systems (the *Air-Sol Moyenne Portée Amélioré* missile and the *Rafale* aircraft), which will enter service starting in 2009. Paris increasingly acknowledges that its 'vital' interests are indistinguishable from those of its European partners.

The 'protection' part of the new strategy requires improving the 'resilience' of the State and society to security shocks, through better crisis management instruments and the revamping of structures and procedures, notably at the local level. A total of 10,000 military personnel are to be earmarked for the protection of the national territory and approaches. It was decided to support the creation of an early warning system to allow the detection of missile launches and trajectories, to be fully set up by 2020. Capabilities in the field of cyber-warfare and bio-defence are also to be strengthened. Most importantly, the 1959 ordinance, which for the past 40 years was the key text laying the rules and procedures for the protection of French territory, is to be replaced by new texts which will recognise an overall conception of 'national security' comprised of defence, part of the homeland security policy and other public policies (such as diplomacy) which contribute to that objective.

'Intervention' now appears last in the hierarchy of French defence roles and missions, but the White Paper's decisions will actually improve France's ability to project forces through better organisation, equipment and mobility. It was judged that most French operations in the future would take place in a multi-national context. Also, the risk of a major conflict in Europe was judged to be very low for the coming 15 years. For these reasons it was determined that the main projection goal was to be 30,000 Army personnel deployed in one theatre in six months and for up to a year, along with 70 combat aircraft able to conduct 100 sorties a day. If fully generated, the 30,000-strong Army contingent would be slightly bigger than a NATO-type division, and would comprise combat and support troops on a 50/50 basis (the Army is currently unable to deploy more than around 26,000 troops outside French metropolitan territory without seriously affecting its normal functioning).

The armed forces are required to maintain, in parallel, 5,000 Army troops and 10 combat aircraft for a smaller but time-urgent contingency, for instance the evacuation of French nationals, the defence of an allied country or a retaliatory action after an act of aggression. This is in addition to the 10,000 Army personnel required for a possible contingency on national territory. The Navy is to be able to deploy one carrier task force when available, and will maintain six nuclear-powered attack submarines as well as 18 front-line frigates and four amphibious command and projection vessels (instead of two today) equipped with 10 helicopters. The decision on whether or not to launch the construction of a second aircraft carrier –which would have ‘sucked out’ much of the Navy’s investment budget– was deferred until 2011. As a consequence, France can only operate a carrier battle group 65% of the time on average. However, as stated, this is to be judged in light of the fact that most operations now take place with the participation of European or NATO allies. Strategic and theatre mobility are to be improved. Precise political criteria for the involvement of armed forces abroad were adopted, and Parliament will have to approve any operation lasting more than four months, except in case of extraordinary circumstances.

The re-organisation of defence personnel amounts to adopting the 1998 British reform motto of ‘Front Line First’. The reduction of 54,000 civilian and military personnel from the Defence Ministry and increased outsourcing will result in inverting the ‘back office/front office’ ratio of defence personnel from about 60/40 to 40/60. Around two-thirds of these cuts result from the decisions of the General Review of Public Policies (RGPP), while one-third results from the White Paper decisions. The 54,000 personnel include 46,500 in the armed forces and 7,500 (civilian and military) in the Defence Ministry’s services. The process will take about eight years, and will be achieved largely through the non-replacement of personnel who retire or finish their contracts. In parallel, the number of military installations is to be drastically reduced, and a massive consolidation plan will take the number of such installations from 300 to around 80 to achieve the RGPP’s goals. The Air Force will lose 25% of its personnel, the Army 17% and the Navy 11%. The number of Air Force online combat aircraft will be reduced from 360 to 270. Of these 270, around 160 are earmarked for operations outside national territory. The Army’s total operational force level is fixed at 88,000 soldiers. Other reorganisation decisions include regrouping all combat aircraft (Air Force and Navy) in a single pool of 300 aircraft to be managed by the Air Force. These decisions have not always been applauded by the armed forces, but there is little doubt that they will embrace change as long as it means better-equipped forces. The real domestic challenges will come from the regions and cities affected by base closures.

The defence budget for 2008 is €36.8 billion. It will remain stable in real terms from 2009 until 2012 and will then grow in real terms by 1% a year. The ‘institutional compromise’ made within the government is that savings made by personnel reductions and force reorganisation will be ‘given back’ to the defence budget. The yearly budgetary outlay available for force modernisation will thus increase by nearly 20%: from €15.5 billion on average in the past few years it will reach €18 billion on average during 2009-20.

The White Paper recognised that full membership in all NATO military institutions would be coherent both with the reality of French commitments since the early 1990s and with the fact that there is today, due to the successive enlargement of both institutions, a very high degree of ‘congruence’ in memberships of the EU and NATO (21 countries are now members of both). The Commission stated ambitious goals for the EU, including an overall 60,000-strong intervention capability. Full membership of NATO foresees the

French return to all military institutions with the exception of the Nuclear Planning Group, that France has already decided it would not join, but it would not result in any savings, and might actually cost money, since a higher number of military officers would have to be posted to various NATO institutions.

Conclusions: The 2008 White Paper's decisions are to be reflected in the next five-year defence plan, which will cover the years 2009-14, and is due to be presented to the French Parliament in late 2008. This will be the first test of the actual will of the Elysée to implement the Paper's recommendations. The White Paper is then meant to be updated every four or five years, coinciding with a new presidential mandate. So perhaps France will adopt the path of 'reform' rather than of 'revolution' after all.

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