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Political and Strategic Consequences of the French White Paper

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Since September, the new French government has been hard at work on a White Paper on Defense. The report, due in April, will set the direction of French security policy for the next decade. It will also indicate the security and foreign policy priorities of the Sarkozy administration – priorities that so far have been somewhat hard to discern.

The last French White Paper was issued in 1994, and it is widely agreed that a new one is needed. The 1994 paper only partially restructured the French military from its Cold War format. Though some steps have been taken to reorient French conventional forces away from Continental war and toward an overseas projection, France's military equipment and capabilities remain the product of decisions made in the 1980s and even 1970s - decisions that reflect both the traditional Gaullist strategy of independence through nuclear deterrence and the assumption of a regular, symmetric enemy.

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Two major concerns will shape the forthcoming White Paper. First, the global strategic environment has grown more and more unpredictable since the early 1990s, thus further complicating force planning. On one level, there has been a shift from the need to plan for a "virtual" total war in Europe to the need to fight real yet far more limited wars, often far afield. This shift alone makes change mandatory. On another level, today's limited wars come in a wide variety of forms, from asymmetric wars like Iraq and Afghanistan to hi-tech, coercive operations like

NATO's air campaign against Serbia in 1999. It is difficult to prepare for all forms at once.

Second, French policymakers are working within the confines of a limited and possibly shrinking budget. Currently, France spends 2.5 % of its GDP on defense (1.7 % with pensions and gendarmerie excluded). This compares favorably with the non-U.S. NATO level of 1.74 percent, but is still substantially less than U.S. spending, which has now topped four percent of GDP.¹ The European Stability and Growth Pact, which limits Europe's budget deficits, means France's defense spending can only rise at the expense of other French budgetary priorities or through an increase in taxes - neither of which seem likely. Meanwhile, today's gloomy economic prospects offer little hope for a significant increase in absolute levels of defense spending. Finally, the postponement of some hefty defense bills over the last 15 years has created a mounting financial bump that will need to be addressed down the road.²

Tradeoffs, therefore, will be necessary, and difficult choices will need to be made. Although deliberations in Paris are ongoing and the outcome of the White Paper is uncertain, the main strategic choices France faces and their ramifications for French allies are already fairly clear.

Four Big Choices

There are numerous individual issues and projects whose fate lies in the balance with this White Paper. These include: French plans to build a second

¹ IISS, *Military Balance 2008*, p. 448.

² See Jean Demaine-Héloir, "Pour une autre politique de défense", *Commentaire*, Vol. 30, No. 118, été 2007.

aircraft carrier; the scope of the Rafale fighter-jet program; the number of French overseas bases; the future of military space programs; the number of Tigre attack helicopters, VCBI armored personnel carriers, and A400M strategic transport aircraft purchases; and the overall number of men and women in uniform. In theory, also in question is the future of France's nuclear deterrent, but it is widely believed that this is not on the table.

For the sake of generalization, these specific issues can be grouped into four broad strategic choices, each of which will result in a different force construct and therefore have different political ramifications for NATO, European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), and French-American relations.³

Stabilization and Reconstruction vs. "High-End" War

The first major choice France will face is between stabilization operations and high-end war-fighting. While it is true that these two types of war are not discrete, but rather overlapping, they nevertheless require a different focus and have different policy implications for both procurement and personnel.

At present, the demand for stabilization operations is very high in both NATO and the EU. France, however, might choose to resist this demand and instead prepare its armed forces for other potential challenges such as a resurgent Russia or regional proliferators. This would entail a trade-off between quantity and technology. By investing in strategic assets (deterrence, space systems, and missile defenses) and hi-tech, transformational systems geared toward high-intensity conflict, sharp cuts in existing forces, especially ground units, would be necessary. The result would be a fully inter-operable yet relatively small French military. There has even been some discussion of reducing the number of troops in the French Army by some 30,000, which would leave France with a force just under 100,000.

Alternatively, France could choose to focus on stabilization operations and reinforce existing general-purpose forces, while "benignly neglecting" its higher-end capabilities. France would steer clear of substantial troop reductions and spend more on

improving training and investments in technologies such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), Armored Personnel Carriers, and strategic transport, as well as potentially new light tanks or heavy helicopters. In this scenario, France would probably need to rely on the United States for some key assets such as strategic intelligence. (This choice would resemble that made in recent years by the British.)

The political ramifications of the choice between stabilization and high-intensity operations depend on what roles NATO and the EU will play in the future. A move toward a more high-tech military might make France less relevant in today's circumstances, where NATO is largely engaged in stabilization operations, but in the future, it could give France greater say, especially if the alliance refocuses on coercive interventions and traditional war. Choosing the high-tech option, however, would do little to enhance the civilian-military and stabilization operations that increasingly have become the EU's main focus and thus appears to contradict the traditional French desire to see the EU play a larger role. Nonetheless, some analysts think France should opt for the high-tech option in hopes of preserving the ability to transform the EU into a full-fledged strategic actor later down the road - if only by preserving a European military industrial base for advanced technology.⁴

In the end, French policymakers may try to avoid this choice altogether. The two alternatives play out over different time horizons and tend to favor certain military services over others. For example in the short-term, an emphasis on stabilization might favor the Army, while over the long-term, hi-tech investments might favor the Air Force and Navy - which explains recent inter-service fighting. To avoid commitments that might deny France the option of acting alone or as the lead-nation in the future, decision-makers will probably choose to keep some flexibility and thus maintain today's "composite" model. This would more evenly distribute the pain of transformation but runs the operational risk of creating a hollow military and the political risk of being neither fish nor fowl and ending up with dwindling influence no matter what direction NATO and the EU take.

³ On the possible force constructs and their respective strategic rationale, see Etienne de Durand, "Quel format pour les armées françaises?", *Politique étrangère*, April 2007.

⁴ Cf. Louis Gautier, "Les chausses-trapes du Livre blanc", *Politique étrangère*, April 2007.

Interdependence vs. Independence

A second major choice France faces is between accepting greater interdependence and maintaining its traditional autonomy. Throughout history, French defense planning has reflected France's political aspiration for independence, and as a result, the French armed forces remain among the most able in the world. Accepting a greater degree of interdependence, however, is tempting because it would free up funds and allow France to focus on improving capabilities in certain key areas.

Where France ultimately lies on the interdependence-independence spectrum is enormously significant for the European Union. One of the principal justifications for ESDP is that it will increase European defense capabilities, both by increasing overall spending levels and by reducing redundancies across Europe, thus giving Europe as a whole more bang for its defense buck. Achieving these efficiencies, however, requires accepting interdependence.⁵ Major European countries like France will need to take the lead. If they do not, opportunities for increased efficiency at the European level will remain limited; ESDP will not live up to its promise and will not satisfy U.S. hopes for an overall increase in European capabilities. This in turn could create a backlash against ESDP in the United States.

There are two ways France could pursue greater interdependence. First, France could leave certain aspects of its defense up to NATO or the EU and pursue niche specialties, as some Eastern European countries have already done. This, however, seems very unlikely. Second, France could choose to pool assets or share platforms with other EU or NATO states. In this case, France and other countries would agree to commonly purchase and share a small number of very expensive - so-called High Demand Low Density (HDL) – platforms such as AWACS or sophisticated drones. This is a less radical and more likely possibility.

Global vs. Flexible

The third major choice France faces is between maintaining France's current global footprint and

concentrating French forces in Europe. Since the eighteenth century, France has had permanent military bases in far corners of the world such as the South Pacific, South America, and Africa. These bases are not just a vestige of France's world power; they also provide considerable practical value for French and European peace and stability operations, especially in Africa.

France's global footprint, however, is expensive, leading some to believe that France would be better off concentrating the majority of its troops in "metropolitan" France, while also investing in training and strategic transport. This would give French leaders the flexibility to deploy more troops to more parts of the world than possible today.

Some in NATO would no doubt prefer to see France increase its flexibility, especially if this meant increasing capabilities for fighting counter-insurgencies and conducting challenging stabilization operations "out-of-area". The loss of French bases in Africa, however, could substantially impede the ability not only of France, but importantly, of the European Union to deploy troops to Africa – a region where the EU believes it has a special role to play in the future – thus dealing a blow to the EU's nascent extra-territorial security policy.

President Sarkozy's January announcement that France would build a base in Abu Dhabi suggests that he will not pull back in any radical way from the current global posture. France may, however, emulate the recent US Global Posture Review and opt for a two- or three tiered system, with a few major bases in key strategic areas and several smaller installations, empty except in time of crisis.

Intervention vs. Homeland Security

Stepping back, arguably the most important question the White Paper will answer is simply whether France intends to maintain a forward leaning, global strategy for its defense, or whether it will spend more money protecting itself at home. France, of course, is not about to retreat from the world, but the tendency towards one approach over the other is nevertheless very important for NATO and, in particular for ESDP.

⁵ See Christopher S. Chivvis, "Birthing Athena: Challenges Ahead for European Security and Defense Policy", Focus Stratégique, Ifri, March, 2008.

An activist global role would allow France to contribute to some NATO operations – such as those underway in Afghanistan – as well as to continue to play a leading role in EU missions in Africa and elsewhere. This, however, would only bolster NATO if France fully came around to the U.S. position that NATO was the appropriate organization for such operations. This is far from certain. More likely, a more activist French military strategy would primarily benefit ESDP, though not necessarily to NATO's detriment.

On the other hand, France could choose to reinforce homeland security, while also investing in strategic assets so as to meet any unidentified threats in the future. This, however, would not only run the risk of endangering transatlantic solidarity given NATO's current commitment in Afghanistan, it would also seriously undermine EU capabilities for overseas interventions, since these have in practice relied very heavily on France. In general, France would end up with less of a say in global politics, and its claim to a seat on the UN Security Council would be based solely on its nuclear forces.

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How then is France to square the budgetary circle without ending up with a hollow military? There is no easy answer. French leaders face tough choices. They may be inclined to avoid them all. But homogenous across-the-board cuts, however tempting, are unlikely to serve the nation's broader objectives and could result in a further decline of French influence in world affairs.

Avoiding the choices would clearly be bad for the EU's global role, which is increasingly driven by and dependent on France. NATO, strained as it is by the U.S. perception that Europe is unwilling to pull its weight, would also suffer. The very transatlantic rift that President Sarkozy has proclaimed himself so eager to close could in fact widen.

The White Paper is nevertheless a chance for positive change. With luck and smart choices, France will reorient its military in a decisive way that serves both the European allies and the broader transatlantic relationship.

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