

Chirac shifts French doctrine for use of nuclear weapons

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Global Research, February 12, 2006

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February 2006

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French President Jacques Chirac last week announced a shift in the country's nuclear deterrence doctrine, enlarging the concept of "vital interests" that French nuclear weapons are designed to protect areas potentially far beyond French borders. He also indicated that nuclear arms might be used in more focused attacks and not only for total destruction.

He also said France's "force de frappe" (nuclear strike force) could be used against states that were "considering" deploying weapons of mass destruction. Chirac did not go further?by design, the doctrine is not precise on what would trigger French use of nuclear weapons ?but observers saw in that statement a reference to the ongoing crisis over Iran's nuclear program.

On the other hand, some analysts said Chirac's praise of the nuclear deterrent as preserving France's security and independence was yet another demonstration, including for Iran, of those weapons' political and strategic utility.

In an address to the strategic submarine forces (FOST) at the Ile Longue nuclear submarine base in Brittany Jan. 19, Chirac said the "perception" of the country's "vital interests" had changed with the world's growing interdependence. "For example, the guarantee of our strategic supplies or the defense of our allies are, among others, interests that are to be protected," he said. Chirac said it is up to the president of the Republic?himself, until at least next year?to determine whether a given "aggression, threat, or unacceptable blackmail" has consequences that bring it within France's "vital interests" and thus could unleash the nuclear deterrent.

He said that while nuclear weapons are not meant to be used against "fanatical terrorists," nevertheless "the leaders of states which used terrorist means against us, as well as those who considered using, in one way or another, weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they are exposing themselves to a firm, appropriate response on our side. That response can be conventional; it can also be of a different nature."

Chirac also said that in responding to threats from "regional powers," the "flexibility and reactivity" of French strategic forces make it possible to attack "centers of power" directly, hampering the enemy's ability to act. France's nuclear forces have been reconfigured to allow such targeted attacks, he said. He revealed for the first time that on some missiles carried by French nuclear submarines, the number of warheads had been reduced. The nominal configuration has been six warheads per missile, but some now have only one, analysts said.

The new doctrine and configuration resembles the “mini-nuke” strategy adopted in the U.S., they said.

Just why Chirac chose now to make this speech? he hasn't addressed the nuclear deterrent issue since 2001? wasn't clear. Some analysts said that it was to answer criticism that the force de frappe, at Eur 3-billion (U.S.\$3.6 billion) per year, is consuming funds that could otherwise be used to beef up conventional forces that are more likely to be used. Chirac argued at Ile Longue that 10% of defense spending for the nuclear forces (the share was 50% 40 years ago, he noted) “is the right price,” and it would be “perfectly irresponsible” to reduce it.

Others, like Georges Le Guelte, an expert with the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS) in Paris, said it might be Chirac's way of “marking his territory.” It could be aimed to prevent his 2007 presidential rival, Nicolas Sarkozy, from starting a debate about the usefulness of the force de frappe, he said. Sarkozy is minister of the interior and chairman of Chirac's party, UMP.

Chirac also mentioned in the Ile Longue speech another debate, on a European defense policy, saying the issue would have to be addressed “in due time.” He said the question of France's and Britain's nuclear deterrent forces would have to be taken into account, but didn't say how they might fit into a western European defense policy nor how they would be controlled.

Le Guelte, in a telephone interview, said France's European Union partners in 1995 had said that they didn't want the French nuclear umbrella and that their preference was to operate within NATO.

If Chirac means to revive a European defense initiative including the nuclear deterrent, he said, it should first be “discussed discreetly with the others,” especially the U.K. and Germany, “and only talked about (publicly) when everyone agrees.”

Chirac's speech raised relatively little public debate in France. Paul Quiles, a former defense minister and defense spokesman for the opposition Socialist Party, said France should be working toward disarmament, not enlarging potential targets for its nuclear warheads. Louis Gautier, the PS' spokesman for strategic issues, called Chirac's speech “dangerously ambiguous” because it suggested France's policy might “slip” toward using nuclear weapons against terrorists. Chirac has denied that is the case. “It gives the impression that France is adopting the American terminology of ‘rogue states’” against which all measures may be used and that France, like the U.S., may be moving towards a “graduated response” doctrine that it has never before voiced, Gautier said.

Le Guelte, who earlier held positions in the French foreign affairs ministry and at the Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique, said that unlike the situation in the U.S., the nuclear deterrent is a “taboo subject” in France. “The biggest, and almost only, opponent of the force de frappe is the Army,” he said. Since the issue is reserved for the president, and both Chirac and his Socialist predecessor Francois Mitterrand were in favor of the nuclear force, there are few politicians to debate the doctrine, he said.

The Chirac speech did, however, raise a ruckus in neighboring Germany, which has always been sensitive about France's nuclear force.

The issue was high on the agenda of the meeting between Chirac and new German Chancellor Angela Merkel in Versailles Jan. 23. After their meeting, Merkel told a press conference that Chirac's position was nothing to be alarmed about, and Chirac insisted France would not use nuclear-tipped missiles as "battlefield weapons," as some people interpreted into his remarks.

Impact on Urenco-Areva?

Inside Merkel's coalition government, opinion about Chirac's announcement was mixed. Foreign policy spokesmen for the co-ruling Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) said publicly that Chirac's statement did not represent a departure from established French nuclear defense policy. Some Social Democrats (SPD) in the coalition joined leftist opposition parties in objecting that the statement by Chirac underscored the view that nuclear weapons were indeed valuable, useful strategic assets at a time when France, the European Union, and other states were trying to discourage Iran from developing nuclear arms.

Some government and industry sources in the Netherlands, U.K. and Germany said that Chirac's remarks were ill-timed, given that a quadripartite agreement including France on uranium enrichment will come up for ratification by the Dutch parliament in coming weeks (NuclearFuel, 2 Jan., 1). The Cardiff Agreement has completed parliamentary approval in the U.K. and was agreed to by the German government, without parliamentary approval necessary, on Oct. 5.

In the Netherlands, it is expected that the agreement will be approved by lawmakers with little opposition. However, Dutch legislators have asked the Dutch government to provide "assurances" that a French uranium enrichment plant outfitted with Urenco-designed centrifuges called for by the deal will not enrich uranium for French submarines, used as delivery systems for France's nuclear weapons.

Government officials who are now responding to Dutch parliamentary questions told Nucleonics Week that such assurances will not be given to lawmakers in The Hague because plans are going ahead in France, the three Urenco countries, and at the IAEA Department of Safeguards for operation of the enrichment plant in France to process military propulsion fuel feedstock. One official said, "This is not an option for France, it is going to happen."

"The pictures of Chirac standing next to a submarine ran in Dutch newspapers and that won't help" Urenco and Areva, another official said.

Inside the German administration, some officials were irritated by Chirac's remarks. They took the view that, in addition to raising the political temperature in Iran, Chirac unnecessarily provoked the large majority of non-nuclear weapons states in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) that were critical of the failure of last year's NPT review conference to reach a consensus on nuclear disarmament issues (NF, 6 June '05, 1).

One official said the Chirac statement "is contrary to the international legal principle of proportionality," which implies that attacking a terrorist group or target with a nuclear weapon would amount to irresponsible overkill. He also said that the remarks will also lead to more intense criticism of France and the other four NPT nuclear weapons states for failure to disarm, as called for under NPT Article VI.

One German official said last week that, regardless of whether Berlin administration officials

were or were not critical of Chirac's remarks, it was widely assumed in the Merkel government that the French president made the statement "out of domestic political desperation." In the background, he said, are opinion polls suggesting that as few as 1% of French voters are in favor of Chirac continuing in office.

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