

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 12
Number 1 *Parameters* 1982

Article 3

7-4-1982

THE COURSE OF FRENCH DEFENSE POLICY

Peter J. Berger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters>

Recommended Citation

Peter J. Berger, "THE COURSE OF FRENCH DEFENSE POLICY," *Parameters* 12, no. 1 (1982), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1279.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USAWC Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters by an authorized editor of USAWC Press.

THE COURSE OF FRENCH DEFENSE POLICY

by

PETER J. BERGER

© 1982 Peter J. Berger

Since the advent of a Socialist government in May 1981, France has lived with an apparent paradox. It has an avowed leftist leadership that has not hesitated to become the first Western government to appoint Communist ministers, yet that leadership has demonstrated an exemplary commitment to European security and defense. Indeed, the extent to which the Mitterrand government has supported the modernization of NATO's theater nuclear forces contrasts favorably with the recent hesitations of other Western European nations. Still, the record is not entirely positive. The positions held by the Socialist Party while in opposition, as well as current French support for various liberation movements and leftist governments in the Third World, raise questions concerning the staying power of France's current defense policy.

FRENCH DEFENSE POLICY TO 1981

The wellsprings of current French defense policy are to be found in two distinct traditions—that of the policies set down by de Gaulle and his successors, and that of the positions taken by the Socialists while in opposition. Neither has proved to be exclusive. As Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy recently remarked, "I am certainly 'the first minister of change,' but there is at least one point about which permanence is needed: the imperatives of defense."¹ In truth, the

distinguishing characteristic of Socialist defense policy of the past 15 months has been the extent to which it has concurred in the basic decisions taken before 1981.

In the years following his return to power in 1958, General de Gaulle sought to change the basis of France's defense. Late in 1959, he set down three basic guidelines that have subsequently served as the principles of French military organization: the independence of France's armed forces, the rejection of an integrated military structure, and the possession of an autonomous nuclear deterrent. De Gaulle did not, however, reject the idea of cooperating with NATO, and he declared in explicit terms that it was most likely that any French military effort would be combined with that of France's allies.²

During the early 1960s, in the wake of NATO's adoption of the strategy of flexible response but prior to France's withdrawal from the integrated military command in March 1966, a certain gap appeared between the French and American conceptions of European security. Thus, in 1964, when for NATO the concept of an initial conventional defense was being instituted, the French Chief of Staff, General Ailleret, criticized the new dispositions and called for a return to the trip-wire strategy.³ If the French tended to accentuate, on the public level, the divergence of their views from those of the rest of NATO, however, the French Army continued to cooperate within the alliance under the terms of the Lemnitzer-Ailleret accords.⁴

A characteristic of the political considerations that influenced French defense policy was the desire to foster detente and escape what the French called the "logic of blocs" (the subordination of national interests to those of an alliance). According to this view, the progressive lessening of tensions in Europe would diminish the importance of NATO and the Warsaw Pact in European security. As a corollary, the French tended to minimize the idea of a direct military threat from the Soviet Union. This perception of an evolution within Europe was accompanied by a parallel belief concerning the world at large that the dual hegemony of the United States and Soviet Union was progressively giving way to what Giscard d'Estaing described as a multipolar system. Consequently, French foreign and defense policy was frequently described as not being aligned with that of the United States.

Under Giscard, French defense policy, however, actually tended toward a somewhat closer relationship with NATO and the United States than had been the case in the years immediately preceding his accession to power. On a doctrinal level, a number of statements were made that recognized that France's security was dependent upon that of her European neighbors and that it was necessary for France to be able "to intervene with all or part of [her] forces" in a situation that threatened her security.⁵ This statement by Chief of Staff General Mery in 1976 was criticized, notably by the Socialists and the Gaullists, mainly because it was interpreted as calling for a de facto reintegration in NATO. The same dispute was reignited in 1979 when a parliamentary report suggested that during the presidency of Giscard d'Estaing, the priority given to the strategic nuclear deterrent had been reduced in favor of too much effort on behalf of the conventional forces. As in 1976, the real object of dispute was the relationship with NATO and, beyond that, the link between France and the United States.

THE SOCIALISTS TO 1981

In the 23 years between de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 and the election of

Francois Mitterrand in 1981, the Socialists were in opposition and without power to influence government defense policy. Under the terms of the French constitution, defense is a "reserved domain" of the president; even the parliament has little real influence over defense decisions. This aspect of the system partially explains the resolute and systematic opposition of the Socialists, who from 1959 to 1981 voted against every defense budget. In the final analysis, however, the Socialists' position stemmed from a hostility toward the party in power that went far beyond any similar opposition that might be found in the United States, a hostility based on dissimilar views of French society and the French economic structure.⁶

In 1972, under the leadership of Francois Mitterrand, the Socialists and Communists signed an electoral pact that was to serve as a joint program and, theoretically, a basis for a government in the event of a victory by the left in the elections. Among the key points of this "Common Program" were renunciation of the strategic nuclear deterrent, regionally based, six-month national service, and the obligation that the government "declare itself in favor of the simultaneous dissolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and Warsaw Pact."

During the mid-1970s the Socialists promoted what their chief defense spokesman, Charles Hernu, referred to as the "citizen-soldier." The Socialists came out in favor of increased rights for draftees and promoted a greater democratization of the army. In addition, they opposed two prominent measures taken under Giscard d'Estaing, a Military Programs Law in 1976 that specifically sought to give the armed

Peter J. Berger is a staff member of the Atlantic Institute in Paris, France. A graduate of Brooklyn College, he received his M.A. degree from Hunter College in 1971 and his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1979. Dr. Berger specializes in French and regional defense problems, and has contributed articles to *Strategique*, *Strategie et Defense*, and *Revue de Defense Nationale*.



forces the capability to fight a sustained conventional war, and a declaration by the Chief of Staff that France must take part in any European battle.

Taking a typically socialist position, Hernu, who would become Minister of Defense after Mitterrand's election, accused the government in June 1978 of undertaking an under-the-table reintegration in NATO. He went on to criticize the existing plans for the use of the Pluton tactical nuclear weapon and charged that the justification for those plans lay in the eventuality of combat alongside NATO forces. This statement by Hernu reflected a fundamental change that had taken place within the Socialist Party. In a special Socialist Party meeting in November 1977 devoted to defense, the party had officially endorsed the French strategic nuclear deterrent. The new party defense doctrine that emerged stressed the need for a truly independent defense and extreme opposition to the relationship with NATO that had been established under Giscard d'Estaing—a relationship perceived by the Socialists as much too close. In this sense, it is noteworthy that the Socialist position had come to resemble that of the Gaullists.⁷

A book by Charles Hernu that appeared in June 1980 outlined to some extent the positions adopted by the Socialists. In that work, Hernu averred that the military balance between the United States and the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly tilted in favor of America; concerning the theater nuclear balance in Europe, he stated, "In truth, the American superiority is total."⁸ It was in regard to the strategic situation prevailing in Europe, however, that Hernu was most critical. He based his analysis on what he perceived to be the mutual sanctuaries of the United States and the Soviet Union and on the uncoupling of American strategic forces from NATO. Thus, Hernu felt that conditions were set for a European nuclear conflict that would spare the territories of the two superpowers.

Such a situation constituted a threat to France, Hernu believed:

Europe is between two systems. The new factor is that she has become the stake of a possible military confrontation of the two superpowers

That is the danger: Europe transformed into a theater of operations at the initiative of the superpowers.⁹

Hernu's solution to this menace was to reject French participation in NATO strategy and reemphasize the strict independence of France's defense. He was extremely critical of the situation in 1980, and he accused the government of acting as though it were a military member of NATO. He felt that it was

important to remain outside of NATO, outside of discrete and progressive integrations, which through military maneuvers have us ready to occupy, in the [Federal Republic of Germany], forward battle positions.¹⁰

It is somewhat paradoxical that the Socialist Party, despite its condemnation of Giscard d'Estaing's policies, did not succumb to the neutralism and pacificism that was then appearing throughout Western Europe. Actually, a contrary Socialist trend was underway. From 1977 to 1980, the Socialists tended to accuse Giscard of not doing enough for defense and of overemphasizing the conventional forces to the detriment of the strategic deterrent. Thus, in a party newspaper that appeared in early 1981, Charles Hernu and Jean-Francois Dubos (who is now a member of Defense Minister Hernu's staff) said that "all the budgets of the military programs laws of 1977-82 tend to reduce in real terms the share of money allotted to the strategic nuclear forces." They further stated, "The choice in favor of neutron weapons [tends] rather to reinforce the scenario of a forward battle."¹¹ These criticisms aside, Hernu and Dubos were critical of the government for falling behind in the delivery of new equipment to the army and for not reaching the limits authorized by the Military

Programs Law. Several specific deficiencies were cited by the authors, among them the absence of sufficient lift for the intervention forces, the problems of air defense and air cover for the combat forces, and the serious decrease in tonnage for the navy.

Regarding the question of a specific Socialist position on defense, a 1981 article written by Jean Paucot was quite explicit. He stated that France's military policy must contain two elements: first, it must provide for a system of minimal deterrence that "applies to national territory alone" and, second, it must provide for a system that "does not leave France without the means to react to different scenarios." With respect to Europe, Paucot felt that "France cannot focus solely on the possibility of a direct conventional or nuclear attack, or a combination of both, in the central theater." Instead, more attention must be given to the southern flank.¹²

When the Socialist Party put together its *Projet Socialiste* ("Socialist Project") in 1979 in preparation for the party's national convention the following April, it provided a detailed view of how the Socialists thought France should be governed. The text was the result of a compromise in which the more radical elements of the party supported the eventual candidacy of François Mitterrand for the French presidency. With respect to the dangers facing France, the "Project" stated:

The traditional view of the threat has made the Eastern bloc the sole source of danger. Thus the exclusive orientation of our defense in that direction. It is imperative that a broader view be taken: the logic of blocs carries within itself . . . dangers that are infinitely more serious.¹³

With regard to the specific issues surrounding the military situation in Europe, the *Projet Socialiste* largely provided the same analysis that was later to appear in Hernu's book, although in one passage the "Project" characterized Western Europe's defense as "a subsystem . . . or defense satellite of the American system." Still, it is significant that for all the criticism of the existing situation

and all the calls for a lessening of tension in Europe through arms reduction, the "Project" called for France to meet her obligations in the Atlantic Alliance "without weakness."¹⁴

Fifteen months later, in January 1981, the Socialist Party issued "110 Propositions for France," a formal campaign manifesto for the coming presidential election. Among the propositions were "progressive and simultaneous disarmament [of NATO and the Warsaw Pact] leading to the dissolution of military blocs," and "the opening of negotiations on collective security in Europe." These negotiations would address the "removal of the Soviet SS-20s simultaneously with the abandonment of the plan for the stationing of American Pershings on European soil."¹⁵

In its rhetoric, the Socialist Party tended to be as critical of the United States as the Soviet Union, although certainly not to the extent of actually calling for France to leave the Atlantic Alliance. And while the party criticized the existing government for its relationship with NATO and criticized NATO as a tool of the United States, such criticisms were not translated into any specific alternative proposals. Beyond the calls for a European security conference and an SS-20/Pershing II trade-off, the Socialists were rather vague concerning the defense policy they would follow were they in power. In statements made before the May election, Charles Hernu pointed out the need to add two ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) by the year 2000 and to otherwise reinforce the navy. He also repeated the charge that France had returned de facto to the NATO military arm, but his alternative was a reemphasis on strategic nuclear deterrence.¹⁶

FRENCH DEFENSE POLICY SINCE MAY 1981

As already noted, defense is considered a "reserved domain" of the French president. That has been a characteristic of the French governmental system since the installation of the Fifth Republic in May 1958. In France, to an even greater extent than is the case in the

United States, it is the president who is responsible for formulating defense policy and making military decisions. The Parliament's role is restricted to approving the defense budget, and the government is not obliged to furnish information that it prefers to keep to itself. Further, the role of a political party is proportionately less; a candidate in France runs as an individual rather than as a formal representative of his party or group. Thus, in May 1981, Francois Mitterrand was completely free to set the course of French defense policy, being in no way bound by the decisions of his predecessor, the Parliament, or the Socialist Party.

Mitterrand himself had spoken out on defense issues before his election, and his personal ideas were not always in accord with those of other Socialists or the party as a body. In a December 1979 press conference, for example, he characterized tactical nuclear force modernization as a logical response (to the current threat), a point of view quite different from positions held by Hernu and Jean-Pierre Chevenement, a leader of the left wing of the Socialist Party. In a series of papers published in 1980, Mitterrand described France's military situation in the following terms:

In truth no one in the West knows what the state of the Alliance is, what its limits are, what reciprocal obligations it [entails], and its degree of automaticity What everyone knows for the moment is that the Alliance rests on . . . American intervention in Europe in the event of Soviet aggression

In the actual state of the Alliance, it is impossible for France to do anything other than assure the defense of its own territory through nuclear deterrence. Any sortie outside her territory would fundamentally contradict that strategy [and] involve us in conflicts that we could no longer control¹⁷

Since May 1981, the Socialist government in France has adopted a defense policy that is largely in accord with the major

decisions of its predecessors. The first evidence that this would be the case came in the waning months of the campaign when the Socialist Party came out in favor of an increase in the SSBN force from six to eight submarines. Mitterrand himself stated on 16 April that he favored the "strategy of national nuclear deterrence," but also that French "conventional forces should not be neglected."¹⁸ If in the period following the election a number of measures were taken to improve the conditions of national service, the length of that service was maintained at one year and no steps were taken to institute any form of a regionally based system. Nor was there any question of permitting soldiers' committees, which the Socialists had supported while in opposition.

This approach to the problem of national service was typical of the way that the Socialists have made the transition from the previous government. If, for example, the Socialists were highly critical of the manner in which the mission of the conventional forces was defined from 1974 to 1981, they nevertheless took care to affirm that the 1976 Military Programs Law would be extended a year to meet the quotas that it had established. On the same subject, Mr. Hernu announced on 16 September that the budget for the army would not be reduced.

Although relatively few new major decisions have been implemented as yet, those that have been announced confirm the general course of the government's policy. Thus, it was officially confirmed that a seventh SSBN would be built, although Defense Minister Hernu has announced that it will not enter service until about 1994. In an interview in *Le Figaro* on 30 January 1982, Hernu noted that the following measures were among the steps being taken to make France's defense more formidable:

- an increase in the number of SSBNs at sea at a given time;
- the launching of a program for a mobile, land-based, intermediate-range ballistic missile;
- the development of a second-generation surface-to-surface tactical nuclear missile;
- the continuation of studies toward

the development of enhanced radiation weapons.¹⁹

On the subject of structuring and equipping the French armed forces, the Socialist government has officially committed itself to following the basic choices set during the term of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. For the moment, the only major change has been the announcement of the construction of an additional SSBN, and this scarcely represents a critical shift in priorities. The other measures, whether concerning a mobile missile or enhanced radiation weapons, simply confirm earlier decisions.

This continuity does not mean that all is exactly as it was before. The official rationale for the extension of the 1976 Military Programs Law is to make up for delays in acquisitions. According to Hernu, this adjustment will be followed in 1983 by a five-year plan that will constitute the framework for the defense budgets of 1984 to 1988. Studies are currently being carried out in the ministry of defense and armed forces in preparation for the implementation of that plan. While it is likely that no fundamental changes will take place, certain shifts in emphasis are possible.

To better understand what these shifts might be, it is necessary to examine the formal statements of French defense doctrine that have been made during the Mitterrand government's first year in power. The first of these statements was delivered on 14 September 1981 by Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy. Marked by a certain traditionalism, this statement offered the assurance that "France intends to remain faithful to her allies, in the first rank of which is the United States of America." After stating that American deterrence is instrumental in maintaining the balance of power, Mauroy rejected the notion that French policy could in any way be neutralist.²⁰ With respect to French defense options, he confirmed the French strategy of deterrence based on anti-cities targeting. He justified the maintenance of conventional forces by arguing that "strategic nuclear deterrence alone could turn out to be inadequate or could be outflanked." Mauroy also noted that the effectiveness of

French conventional forces would be increased by their possession of tactical nuclear weapons. As to the eventual missions of the French Army, Mauroy said:

The French Republic will never initiate a conflict, [which] implies that we must be prepared for several eventualities. To refuse to give ourselves the means to respond to . . . aggression would be, in the last analysis, to cast doubt on our resolution to defend ourselves, and, consequently, on our strategy of deterrence.²¹

This approach to France's defense problems was echoed in a speech given by the Chief of Staff, General Lacaze, on 29 September 1981, in which he examined French links with NATO in unusual detail. Cooperation with the integrated military command would, according to General Lacaze, be based upon three principles:

- Cooperation would be restricted to conventional forces;
- There would be no automatic engagement of French forces;
- In the case of engagement alongside NATO forces, French forces would remain grouped under national command and in directions or zones covering national territory.²²

Further, General Lacaze specifically rejected the idea of French participation in nuclear land warfare, and he defined French tactical nuclear weapons doctrine as being that of "final warning," and the eventual use of tactical nuclear weapons as being "limited in time and space."

The statements made by Minister Mauroy and General Lacaze differed somewhat from the position adopted by President Mitterrand in his 26 September press conference. In describing French defense doctrine, Mitterrand limited himself to remarking that "national territory will be defended against any aggression and by the means at our disposal, which are not those of a graduated defense."²³

Perhaps the most interesting commentary on current defense policy comes from Defense Minister Charles Hernu. It is

doubly significant, for not only is it an official declaration of defense policy, but it also illustrates the difference between the Socialists in opposition and the Socialists as the government of France. Thus, the affirmation of an American military superiority in strategic forces is replaced by a recognition of the danger posed by Soviet counterforce potential. Likewise, there is no longer any inference of an American superiority, or even adequacy, in the European theater. The only area in which Hernu declares that America maintains an advantage is in short-range systems. In global terms, he states that there exists "a grave potential risk of a rupture of equilibrium in favor of the USSR toward the middle of the decade."²⁴

With respect to specific measures, Hernu confirms the need for

battle forces, modern and mobile, to guard our approaches and, in the worst of cases, to [deliver a] tactical nuclear blow [if] provoked by an attack [aimed] at the vital interests of France.

While not defining these "vital interests" further, Hernu notes that "a serious menace to the security" of allied states "would affect, gravely, the security of France."²⁵

IN SUM

The available evidence suggests that the leaders of the current French government, once faced with the responsibilities of power, have considerably modified a number of key positions that they held when they were in opposition. Of greatest importance is the acceptance of the necessity of a policy of close cooperation with NATO. This position represents a continuation of past defense policy, and it is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. It does not exclude, however, a certain redefinition of the role of French battle forces. In any case, the existing framework of nonmembership in the NATO military arm—but support for the Atlantic Alliance—will continue to guide French decision-making.

If the Socialists have adopted in their Third World policy a position that conflicts

with the views of the United States, and one that is sometimes a source of tension, Americans must balance that problem against the value of a French approach to the security of Europe that is not in conflict with US interests. Earlier Socialist suggestions of a US-Soviet "arrangement" that would keep the territories of the two superpowers unscathed while they fought a war in Europe have been replaced by a more measured assessment of the European military situation. Also, the repeated condemnations of neutralism by French officials reveal their concerns. As Defense Minister Hernu took care to point out on 30 January, "Alone among the major European nations, France will clearly exceed in 1982 an increase of three percent in her military budget."²⁶

France has a long tradition of commitment and sacrifice for her defense, and in the early 1980s she has a key role to play in Europe's continued security. This consideration is not lost on the Mitterrand government. Nor is France reticent to recognize the indispensable role that the United States plays, both in Europe and globally. The sense of shared values with the United States, and the shared recognition that the coming years are fraught with danger, are stronger than any disagreement or divergent political ideology.

NOTES

1. Pierre Mauroy, address to the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Defense Nationale, 14 September 1981.

2. Charles de Gaulle, address to the Ecole Militaire, 3 November 1959.

3. See de Gaulle's remarks made during his press conference of 14 January 1963.

4. These set the technical cooperation that governed links between the French Army and NATO after the 1966 withdrawal.

5. General Mery, "Une Armee Pour Quoi Faire et Comment," *Revue de Defense Nationale*, 22 (June 1976), 11-34.

6. The hostility of the right and left in France can be imagined from the fact that de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 was considered by the left to be illegal.

7. It should be noted that while they formed part of the governing majority during this time, the Gaullists criticized Giscard's defense policy as being too favorable to the United States.

8. Charles Hernu, *Nous . . . Les Grands* (Paris: F.G.-P.R.E.S., 1980), pp. 49-50.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

11. Jean-François Dubos and Charles Hernu, "Bilan d'un Septennat," *Armee Nouvelle*, 1st trimester 1981.
12. Jean Paucot, "Pour une Politique Militaire," *Armee Nouvelle*, 1st trimester 1981.
13. Socialist Party, *Projet Socialiste* (Paris: Club Socialiste du Livre, 1980), p. 347.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 348. The most radical proposition called for "a modification of our system of defense, notably by the setting up of a popular mobilization force, based on a short national service" (p. 351).
15. Socialist Party, *110 Propositions Pour la France*, propositions six and eight.
16. Charles Hernu, interview in *Le Matin*, 8 May 1981.
17. François Mitterrand, *Ici et Maintenant* (Paris: Fayard, 1980), p. 232.
18. Mitterrand interview with the Agence France-Presse, 15 April 1981. For the best description of recent French decisions see Hernu's presentation of the 1982 defense budget in the *Journal Officiel* of 14 November 1981.
19. Charles Hernu, "Une Defense, des Choix, des Moyens," *Le Figaro*, 30 January 1982.
20. Pierre Mauroy, address to the Institut des Hautes de Defense Nationale, 14 September 1981.
21. *Ibid.*
22. General Lacaze, speech to the Centre des Hautes Etudes de l'Armement, 29 September 1981.
23. François Mitterrand, Press Conference of 26 September 1981.
24. Charles Hernu, address to the Institut des Hautes Etudes de Defense Nationale, 16 November 1981.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Le Figaro*, 30 January 1982.

