

A COMPARISON BETWEEN US, UK AND FRENCH NUCLEAR POLICIES AND DOCTRINES

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The thesis of this paper is that there is much more similarity between the nuclear doctrines of the three allied nuclear powers than generally thought. Differences concern the area of *policies* rather than *doctrines*.

SIMILARITIES

Similarities between the three nuclear powers

French doctrine is much closer to US and UK doctrines than generally thought. For historical and political reasons, there has always been a tendency to exaggerate the differences in the ways the three nuclear powers view their nuclear arsenals: France, in particular, has always been keen to manifest its “difference” since it left the NATO integrated structure in 1967.



(One of the reasons was a disagreement with the abandonment of the massive retaliation strategy in favor of flexible response, which Paris saw as a downgrading of the US security guarantee. NATO adopted MC-14/3 after the French departure.) In addition, there may have been a gradual convergence of all three doctrines: since the end of the Cold war, both Washington and London have been keen to elevate the nuclear threshold, while Paris has adopted a more flexible nuclear posture.

London, Paris and Washington share a common view about the fundamentally political role of nuclear weapons, which is supposed to be an instrument of deterrence rather than a war-fighting tool. Nuclear deterrence is relevant whatever the means employed by the adversary in circumstances where essential security interests are at stake. In the current strategic environment, none of them foresees a conventional threat that might warrant exercising nuclear deterrence the same way it was practiced during the Cold war – something that differentiates them from most nuclear-capable nations.¹ Nevertheless, all three capitals oppose a “no-first-use doctrine”: they believe it would weaken deterrence by allowing an adversary to calculate the risks inherent in his aggression, and in particular signal that the use of chemical or biological weapons could be considered without a risk of nuclear retaliation. As a consequence, assurances of non-use against non-nuclear countries (simultaneously reaffirmed in 1995 by all three) have been accompanied by identical caveats, as well as by national interpretative declarations. The legal principle of “belligerent reprisals” has been used implicitly by all three capitals to justify such caveats.

This transatlantic consensus was made clear in the 1999 NATO Strategic Concept, which states: « *The fundamental purpose of the nuclear forces of the Allies is political: to preserve peace and prevent coercion and any kind of war. They will continue to fulfill an essential role by ensuring uncertainty in the mind of any aggressor about the nature of the Allies' response to military aggression. They demonstrate that aggression of any kind is not a rational option. The supreme guarantee of the security of the Allies is provided by the strategic nuclear forces of the Alliance, particularly those of the United States; the independent nuclear forces of the United Kingdom and France, which have a deterrent role of their own, contribute to the overall deterrence and security of the Allies* ».²

¹ India and Israel would probably share that view.

² The Alliance's Strategic Concept approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 23-24 April 1999, para. 62.

Also, there is recognition of common risks posed by the proliferation of ballistic missiles and NBC weapons; France (like the United Kingdom) has adapted its nuclear arsenal in order to be able to have more diversified nuclear options.

London, Paris and Washington exercise nuclear deterrence primarily through the threat of inflicting “unacceptable damage” upon an adversary. Targeting would focus on assets held dear by an adversary. All three countries insist that they should have limited nuclear options in addition to massive strike options. They have adapted their respective nuclear arsenals in order to be able to make them relevant to a world of multiple and diverse nuclear deterrence scenarios and thus ensure that deterrence remains credible in the eyes of an adversary in foreseeable scenarios. None of them mentions “counter-city” targeting anymore, at least in public language.

All three countries seem to implicitly consider that Russia and China should be treated as potential major threats, and continued at-sea deterrence is seen as an integral part of deterrence, with at least one SSBN on patrol at all times. Nevertheless, all three have “de-targeted” their nuclear forces along with the other two official Nuclear-Weapon States.³

None of these points of convergence has been put into question by the revision of the US deterrence posture by the Bush administration (“Nuclear Posture Review”, conducted in 2001 and announced in February 2002). The US nuclear deterrent continues to take into account the possibility of a major threat coming for instance from Russia or China, and despite what some observers believe, has not “lowered” the nuclear threshold.⁴

Such convergences should not be surprising. The French nuclear mythology does not do justice to the importance of UK and US inputs to the origins of French strategy. They remain, to a large extent, “repressed memories” of the French nuclear education.

The UK government’s adoption of a massive retaliation strategy attracted attention in the early years of the French program. Deterrence of the strong by the weak and its logical implications were implicit in UK doctrine as early as 1957-1958. In his main book, *Stratégie*

³ A P-5 statement was made to that effect in 2000.

⁴ A more detailed presentation of current national doctrines is included in David S. Yost, « New approaches to deterrence in Britain, France and the United States », *International Affairs*, Vol. 81, n° 1, 2005, pp. 83-114. The article also includes a comparative approach.

de l'âge nucléaire, published in 1960, general Pierre Gallois describes at length the British deterrent and implicitly tells his French readers that Paris could adopt the same posture. In 1963 he even acknowledged that the UK example was a “model” for France.

Initial French thinking about nuclear strategy also came from NATO. The main French military thinkers such as generals André Beaufre and Pierre Gallois learned about nuclear strategy in a allied context. Beaufre held several NATO positions, including deputy-Chief of Staff at Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE), and French representative to NATO's Standing Group. In 1952-53, he pioneered NATO studies about early and massive use of nuclear weapons. Gallois for his part, as one of the four officers forming the “New Approach Group”, was one of the authors of the MC-48 “massive retaliation” strategy. Both Beaufre and Gallois had numerous interactions with the RAND Corporation, then the intellectual breeding ground of US nuclear strategy.

Some specific French expressions come from allied doctrines, such as “unbearable” or “unacceptable” damage. The former expression originated in the UK White Paper of 1962, and the latter was introduced by the US Government in the early 1960s.⁵ It appeared in France in the early 1970s. Another borrowed expression was “sufficiency”, which had been introduced by the Nixon administration in 1969 as to signify the refusal of “superiority”. Finally, there is a troubling coincidence between the French sufficiency level and the criteria that the United States adopted in the early 1960s for “assured destruction” (an expression also later used by French leaders) in terms of number of Soviet cities and percentage of the population that needed to be threatened.⁶

The UK White Paper published in December 2006 revealed new convergences between Paris and London. These include: the systematic use of the expression “vital interests”; the State terrorism scenario; the role of missile defense; and the implicitly strategic nature of any nuclear strike.

⁵ For instance, “*maintaining a clear and convincing capability to inflict unacceptable damage on an attacker*,” in Senate Armed Services Committee, Military Procurement Authorization, Fiscal Year 1966, Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1965, p. 43. MacNamara also referred from 1962 onwards to “*intolerable punishment*”; see for instance Statement of Secretary of Defense Robert S. MacNamara before the House Armed Services Committee on the Fiscal Year 1966-1970 Defense Program and 1966 Defense Budget, February 18, 1965, p. 39.

⁶ See Bruno Tertrais, « ‘Destruction Assurée’ : The Origins and Development of French Nuclear Strategy, 1945-1981 » in Henry D. Sokolski (ed.), *Getting MAD : Nuclear Mutual Assured Destruction, Its Origins and Practice* (Carlisle, PA : Strategic Studies Institute, November 2004), pp. 51-122.

DIFFERENCES

There are, however, differences. A few of these differences pit France against its two “Anglo-Saxon” NATO allies. Other differences exist between Paris and London on the one hand, Washington and the other; they are clearly linked with the common status of both France and the United Kingdom as two relatively small, European nuclear powers.⁷

Differences between France and its allies

Today, three particular features of French nuclear doctrine differentiate it from the American and British ones.

France’s concept of a “final warning” is different from the US/UK concept of “sub-strategic” or “non-strategic” planning and use. The final warning is the idea to threaten an adversary who might have underestimated French resolve to defend its vital interests, or misjudged the exact limits of these interests, with a single limited strike on military targets. Forged in the 1970s, the final warning concept is a compromise between the need to avoid the “all or nothing” dilemma and the equally pressing need, in French minds, to avoid adopting a flexible response-type concept – both options judged not credible. The final warning could not be repeated, and would be followed by a massive strike if the adversary persisted. It is judged still relevant in the new strategic context, given that a regional or distant adversary might be more prone to misjudge French determination to safeguard its vital interests than the former Soviet Union would have been. (Another idea particular to France is the idea that since 1996 all nuclear weapons are *explicitly* considered “strategic”. The idea is that any nuclear weapons use would be a sea change in the nature of the conflict, and therefore would be of a strategic nature. However, the same logic seems to be increasingly in use in NATO circles, and the United Kingdom does not mention the word “sub-strategic” anymore.)

A second major difference exists in the way the legal grounds for nuclear deterrence are expressed in declaratory policies (“how do we deter?”).

⁷ Needless to say, there is also a fundamental divergence between London and Paris on the rationale for nuclear weapons and respective conceptions of nuclear independence. They are rooted in the Suez crisis.

Since the end of the Cold war, Washington and London express their willingness to consider the use of nuclear weapons vis-à-vis a regional WMD threat through the threat of unspecified retaliation. (A classic example is the expression “overwhelming and devastating response”.) France, by contrast, chooses to center its declaratory policy vis-à-vis such threats by promising a nuclear response to any aggression against its vital interests, whatever the means employed.⁸ This reflects a different conception of deterrence and in particular of the balance between certainty and uncertainty: Washington and London are clear about the circumstances that would constitute a particular threshold (WMD use), but unclear about the response; Paris is vague about the exact threshold (“vital interests”), but clear about the response.⁹

This also reflects a different legal culture. Both the United States and the United Kingdom are traditionally keen to ensure the compatibility, at least on paper, of their doctrines with international law, in particular the compatibility of the negative security assurances with their stated nuclear doctrines. France traditionally has a more lenient view of the impact of international legal norms on its policy.¹⁰ It insists publicly on the importance of the right to self defense enshrined in Article 51 of the United Nations Charter as a legal basis for nuclear deterrence.¹¹ But it has never been inclined to emphasize the need for a “proportionate” response as its US and UK allies do.¹²

This difference is now less apparent: the UK White Paper published in December 2006 systematically uses the expression “vital interests”.

Generally speaking, France has been much more vocal than its allies in stating publicly and explicitly the usefulness of nuclear deterrence vis-à-vis regional and WMD threats – including

⁸ Another difference is that contrary to what the United States and the United Kingdom have done in recent years, France has not sought to deter the use of WMD through the threat of making « personally accountable » those responsible for such use.

⁹ A noteworthy exception is Chirac’s January 2006 speech : *“Leaders of States resorting to terrorist means against us, as those who might consider, one way or the other, weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they risk a firm and adapted response from us. And this response can be of a conventional nature. It can also be of another nature”*. (Allocution de M. Jacques Chirac, Président de la République, lors de sa visite aux forces aérienne et océanique stratégiques, Landivisiau – l’Île Longue (Brest), 19 January 2006).

¹⁰ This difference in legal cultures was made clear during the presentation of national arguments to the International Court of Justice in 1995-1996, following the UN General Assembly’s request for an advisory opinion on the legality of the use or threat of use of nuclear weapons.

¹¹ Indian thinking is close to French thinking in this regard. See Draft Report of National Security Advisory Board (NSAB) on Indian Nuclear Doctrine, 17 August 1999.

¹² The right to self defense is based on criteria of necessity and proportionality.

for States sponsoring such attacks. Here the difference may be due to different factors at play in Washington and London: since 1997, the delicate ideological balance within the Labour Party has made British leaders more prudent than previous (Conservative) governments in their support for the relevance of nuclear weapons.

A third area of differentiation is extended deterrence. While Paris has never seen its nuclear arsenal as solely protecting its national territory, and has stated at several occasions since the end of the Cold war that its deterrent also protects common European vital interests, France has never explicitly expressed a concept of “extended deterrence”.

There is no French opposition to the NATO nuclear posture, as demonstrated by French agreement to the following paragraph included in the 1999 Strategic Concept : *« A credible Alliance nuclear posture and the demonstration of Alliance solidarity and common commitment to war prevention continue to require widespread participation by European Allies involved in collective defence planning in nuclear roles, in peacetime basing of nuclear forces on their territory and in command, control and consultation arrangements. Nuclear forces based in Europe and committed to NATO provide an essential political and military link between the European and the North American members of the Alliance. The Alliance will therefore maintain adequate nuclear forces in Europe. These forces need to have the necessary characteristics and appropriate flexibility and survivability, to be perceived as a credible and effective element of the Allies' strategy in preventing war. They will be maintained at the minimum level sufficient to preserve peace and stability. »*¹³

This extended deterrent is reaffirmed in the NATO Strategic concept *« The Allies concerned [author's note: i.e. excluding France] consider that, with the radical changes in the security situation, including reduced conventional force levels in Europe and increased reaction times, NATO's ability to defuse a crisis through diplomatic and other means or, should it be necessary, to mount a successful conventional defense has significantly improved. The circumstances in which any use of nuclear weapons might have to be contemplated by them are therefore extremely remote. Since 1991, therefore, the Allies have taken a series of steps which reflect the post-Cold War security environment. These include a dramatic reduction of the types and numbers of NATO's sub-strategic forces including the elimination of all nuclear artillery and ground-launched short-range nuclear missiles; a significant relaxation of the*

¹³ The Alliance's Strategic Concept approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council, 23-24 April 1999, para. 63.

readiness criteria for nuclear-armed forces; and the termination of standing peacetime nuclear contingency plans. NATO's nuclear forces no longer target any country. Nonetheless, NATO will maintain, at the minimum level consistent with the prevailing security environment, adequate sub-strategic forces based in Europe which will provide an essential link with strategic nuclear forces, reinforcing the transatlantic link. These will consist of dual capable aircraft and a small number of United Kingdom Trident warheads. Sub-strategic nuclear weapons will, however, not be deployed in normal circumstances on surface vessels and attack submarines. »¹⁴

Differences between the United States and its allies

Some differences exist between US nuclear policy and those of its two European nuclear allies.

In the general realm of nuclear policy, both France and the UK have emphasized the importance of strengthening international legal norms of non-proliferation: they both have ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and are keen to see a Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty (FMCT).

A major traditional difference is that neither London nor Paris is known to consider “counterforce” nuclear options. Both countries have stated “minimum deterrence” posture (the French concept is called “sufficiency”), which implicitly exclude such options. This is clearly an effect of the limited availability of technical and financial resources, since counterforce is the most demanding of all nuclear missions. Largely for the same reasons, there is no evidence that either France or the United Kingdom has ever considered multiple strategic strikes: “unacceptable damage” would be a single strike option.

A more recent difference concerns the place of nuclear deterrence in national security policies. Since the 1960s, the United States has sought to reduce the role of nuclear weapons in its defense strategy. Recent progress in conventional precision munitions and missile defense has made it possible to further downgrade the role of nuclear deterrence. The 2001 Nuclear Posture Review was a milestone in this regard: the new US “Triad” considerably reduces the role of nuclear weapons in the US defense policy. France acknowledged in 2003 that *“the improvement of [conventional] capabilities for long-range*

¹⁴ The Alliance’s Strategic Concept, op. cit., para. 64.

*strikes should constitute a deterrent threat for our potential aggressors.*¹⁵ And Paris and London have sought to take advantage of new technologies to develop more efficient long-range precision strike capabilities.¹⁶ But neither France nor the United Kingdom has been willing to recognize a major strategic role for conventional deterrence to the point of making it an equivalent of nuclear deterrence. Likewise, they have never emphasized the notion of “deterrence by denial” (be it through the threat of nuclear use or missile defense).

At the same time, US nuclear weapons have also two roles that have no real equivalent in French and British official thinking. One of them is what the 2001 NPR calls “Reassurance”: US nuclear protection help avoiding nuclear proliferation for those countries (such as Japan) which are explicitly protected by such weapons. The other is what the NPR called “Dissuasion”, a concept that primarily applies to missile defense but also to nuclear weapons to some extent: US nuclear weapons are seen as having a role as a disincentive for those countries which could be tempted to match the United States from a military standpoint. (A practical consequence is that the United States maintains a fairly high number of nuclear weapons in its nuclear arsenal to avoid a country such as Russia or China to be able to claim one day that it is the “first” nuclear power.) These two attributes of US nuclear weapons are largely foreign to British and French thinking.

Finally, one should note that there are a few areas of convergence between the United States and France which leave the United Kingdom isolated. Paris in recent years has proven much more “conservative” than London in the general area of nuclear disarmament, allowing for a notable French-US convergence at the 2000 and 2005 NPT Review Conferences. France’s interpretation of Article VI of the NPT and of the commitments made in 2005 (the so-called “13 Steps”) is much closer to that of the Bush administration than of that of the UK government. It intends to retain nuclear weapons as long as it judges it necessary for its security. Also, France maintains a wider range of nuclear options than the United Kingdom through the continued existence of an airborne component, which can be launched from land or from the sea (from an aircraft carrier). Finally, the UK singularizes itself by singling out the nuclear threat.

¹⁵ Loi no. 2003-73 du 27 janvier 2003 relative à la programmation militaire pour les années 2003 à 2008, section 2.3.1., “Les fonctions stratégiques”.

¹⁶ In the 1990s, France and the UK developed jointly a stand-off conventional missile called the « Storm Shadow ».

Conclusions

The three allied nuclear powers do not have identical conceptions on the role of nuclear weapons in their security policies and there are significant differences in their declaratory policies. Those divergences stem both from different strategic cultures and the availability of technical and budgetary resources.

There are however enough similarities between the three countries about nuclear weapons, and their conceptions of when and how to exercise nuclear deterrence, to say that there is an “imperfect consensus” between them on nuclear doctrine.

The evolution of French nuclear policy since 2001 (in addition to the evolution of British nuclear policy in 2006) tends to make the differences less salient than the points of convergence. Three points deserve being noted: an increasing willingness by France to recognize the usefulness of conventional weapons for deterrence and of missile defense; a clear readiness to affirm the role of nuclear weapons to deter the use of WMD by regional actors, including State sponsors of terrorism; and emerging deterrence statements (“firm and appropriate response”) that relate more to US (and British) thinking than to the traditional French approach.

Where does this evolution come from? Does France deliberately seek to bring its nuclear policy closer to the United States? Such an explanation would be not credible, given the rocky history of US-French relations since the end of the Cold war – and the importance that Paris attributes to nuclear weapons, which does not make nuclear policy an area for diplomatic games. French thinking may be influenced by the strategic debates that take place in the United States – as was the case during the Cold war. However, it would not be appropriate to call these recent evolutions an “Americanization” of French nuclear policy. As David Yost rightly points out, *“What some observers have called “Americanization” would therefore be more accurately termed a de facto convergence of some key features of independently developed U.S. and French policies.”*¹⁷

¹⁷ David S. Yost, « France’s new nuclear doctrine », *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, n° 4, 2006, p. 718.