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## France and SDI

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Scott R. Mixer

**T**hose critics who argue that the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) will divide the Atlantic alliance, frequently cite the French Government's opposition as evidence. The French view of SDI, however, is neither simple nor monolithic. While President François Mitterrand has been consistently critical of SDI, Prime Minister Jacques Chirac is far more supportive, at least rhetorically. Key members of the defense establishment, both in government and in the private sector, moreover, favor a national antimissile system to defend France's military installations. While a space-based area defense is opposed as weakening deterrence, a point defense of U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) is widely seen as enhancing it.

These were among the salient points raised during interviews in Paris with senior government officials, members of the National Assembly, defense analysts and executives of firms specializing in advanced technologies. The interviews contradict much of what has been written on the French reaction to SDI. Launching SDI without prior consultation with France did not ensure the lasting opposition of the French Government, despite frequent observations to the contrary. It is also incorrect to argue that French leaders are genuinely worried that SDI will "decouple" the United States from Western Europe by encouraging a Fortress America mentality. Nor is it true that for the foreseeable future the French will be concerned about the possibility of Soviet missile defenses undermining the *force de frappe*.

Senator Jean François-Poncet, who served under former President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as Foreign Minister, stated that the United States will only begin to consult with the European members of NATO once Europe becomes united. In the meantime, Washington's impatience with its weak and

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fractious allies is only natural: "If the U.S. had discussed SDI with NATO before Reagan's speech in March 1983, they would still be in the process of discussion." A senior defense adviser to Mitterrand, while acknowledging that Washington's failure to consult with its allies on issues affecting their security is a chronic and familiar problem, insisted that it did not determine France's official policy toward SDI. Nevertheless, informed observers in France cite the sixty-day deadline which Secretary of Defense Weinberger gave to U.S. allies for responding to his offer of participation in SDI as an example of a "typical lack of understanding of the European mentality." While criticizing America's diplomatic clumsiness, however, they remain remarkably philosophical about the Atlantic alliance and emphasize the value of close transatlantic relations.

Mr. François-Poncet also said that the French have not been preoccupied with SDI because it is still evolving and has, thus far, limited relevance for France. Several members of the National Assembly concurred, suggesting that neither France nor other NATO allies had any business approving or disapproving of SDI since it is an American project, initiated, managed and paid for by the United States with the primary goal of enhancing American security.

Nonetheless, the three major parties have serious doubts about the technological feasibility of making nuclear weapons "impotent and obsolete." Mitterrand's *Parti Socialiste (PS)* dismisses this vision as unrealistic (and undesirable), but appears to accept the inevitability of SDI and recommends joint European projects in related fields. Not faced with the responsibilities of government, the *PS* is even more outspoken than Mitterrand in its criticism of SDI as an obstacle to East-West arms control agreements. While the *Rassemblement pour la République (RPR)* of Prime Minister Chirac strongly criticizes Mitterrand's negative attitude towards SDI, it also rejects Reagan's vision. Instead, the *RPR* supports active French participation in SDI research to acquire technology for a European ballistic missile defense (BMD) capability. The Gaullists support a European BMD program to avoid a condominium between the superpowers in which Western Europe would be held hostage.<sup>1</sup> Like the *PS*, the *RPR* tends to have policies which are more extreme than those of its members who hold positions in the government. The *Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF)* of Giscard d'Estaing and former Prime Minister Raymond Barre are also critical of Mitterrand's hostility towards SDI. However, the *UDF* believes that France can benefit by participating in SDI research.<sup>2</sup>

Whether SDI will have a positive or negative effect on French security depends, in part, on how SDI evolves. Our interlocutors agreed, for example, that if ballistic missile defense could reduce the vulnerability of ICBM fields in the United States, and in particular, urban centers, to Soviet attack, the American commitment to defend Europe by conventional or nuclear means

would be strengthened. This view is endorsed in a major study on SDI entitled "France, Europe and ABM," published last year by the Foundation for National Defense Studies in Paris. According to this view, a missile defense system which protects population centers in the United States would further "couple" U.S. and West European security by increasing the credibility of the American nuclear guarantee. Michel Tatu, chief editorial writer for *Le Monde* and frequent commentator on strategic issues agrees: "It is hard to see why what is already unacceptable today—the loss of Europe to Soviet domination—would be more easily tolerated in fifteen years by an America that had become less vulnerable and, hence, stronger."<sup>3</sup>

Most French defense analysts doubt, however, that SDI would sufficiently reduce the vulnerability of American cities to have such a coupling effect because the Soviet Union would be able to penetrate area defenses with simple countermeasures. Furthermore, area defenses that were not totally effective would trigger an offensive arms race at higher and less stable levels as well as undermine East-West détente.<sup>4</sup> These analysts would prefer, on balance, an American system that protected ICBMs and, consequently, increased the U.S. capacity, if not its willingness, to retaliate against a Soviet offensive.

While a proliferation of Soviet offensive forces would naturally be contrary to French security interests, most defense experts in France do not consider the expansion of Soviet missile defenses to be a major threat to the *force de frappe*. The French nuclear weapons modernization program now nearing completion has already taken into account future improvements in Soviet antimissile (ABM) systems. France's plans to refit 5 submarines with the M-4 missile equipped with 6 warheads will result in a French nuclear arsenal of roughly 500 warheads by the mid-1990s.<sup>5</sup> While that is less than one-twentieth of the number of warheads currently in the U.S. arsenal, France would still be able to observe the strategic principle of proportionality according to which an aggressor can be deterred by threatening it with destruction equal to or greater than the gain it hopes to achieve. The French military is also developing the SX (a land-based missile that rotates in flight), working on technology that would enable missiles to have short boost-phases and low trajectories, and equipping existing missiles with hardened warheads and decoys. Other measures under consideration include developing cruise missiles, antisatellite (ASAT) weapons, and targeting more Soviet urban, administrative and economic centers.<sup>6</sup> This last measure would reinforce the shift that has taken place in France's strategic targeting since 1980.

While pursuing many of these measures would be expensive, it would not require increasing the nuclear share of the defense budget beyond one-fifth, the current figure. In fact, the expenditures for nuclear modernization will soon decline and the removal of the medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) from the *Plateau d'Albion* by the end of the 1990s will result in substantial savings.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the French defense establishment are confident that a significant percentage of France's nuclear force will be able to penetrate Soviet defenses and inflict an unacceptable level of damage, at least for another 10 to 20 years. They are very confident that the most important leg of the French strategic triad—the nuclear-powered submarine fleet—will remain invulnerable in the foreseeable future because breakthroughs in antisubmarine warfare technology are improbable. French defense experts doubt whether the Soviets will ever possess the financial and technical means to deploy effective missile defenses around all of their large and medium-sized cities.<sup>8</sup> France's anticiptic nuclear strategy is less demanding than the British in that it does not have a "Moscow Criterion" according to which the Soviet capital, currently defended by nearly 100 interceptor missiles, must be an available target for retaliation. While a significant Soviet ABM system would render precise and controlled retaliatory strikes ineffective, successive French governments have never endorsed limited nuclear options (LNOs) and flexible response. French defense officials have occasionally referred to the "prestrategic" strikes that France would launch before using its countervalue options to repel Soviet aggression. French nuclear strategy, however, remains based on the assumption that the early use and rapid escalation of nuclear weapons constitute the most credible deterrent.<sup>9</sup>

Despite this confidence, French defense experts would prefer not to cope with the uncertainties that a Soviet ABM system might introduce into the strategic equation over the long term. Their concern about strategic stability is compounded by their fear that the United States will not be able to maintain both its current level of commitment to defend Europe with conventional weapons and an expensive SDI program.

While these experts are ambivalent, therefore, about the desirability of altering the offense-defense mix at the strategic level, there is a significant amount of support for greater emphasis on defensive technologies at the theater level. Nonnuclear terminal defense of airfields, harbors, munitions factories and other military installations has many supporters in France, mostly on the political right. These supporters fear that the nation might become vulnerable to a highly accurate missile attack with conventional, chemical or low-yield nuclear warheads that would destroy key military assets without inflicting substantial collateral damage to the civilian population. General Jannou Lacaze, former French Chief of Staff, discussed this possibility in May 1985: "The attack of our fixed installations—Albion, strategic bases, pre-strategic missile depots, command posts, communication centers—by ballistic or cruise missiles with conventional warheads represents a new threat which we must take into account, all the more since an aggressor could be led to believe that their use would not be considered a major attack and would not give rise to massive reprisals."<sup>10</sup> According to this scenario, French leaders would have to choose between capitulating to Soviet threats

and initiating a nuclear exchange. Consequently, defense against bombers, cruise missiles and nonballistic SS-21s, 22s and 23s should be improved, according to a senior national security adviser to Mitterrand, even if it requires a revision of the 1972 ABM Treaty.

The nonmilitary aspects of SDI have attracted as much attention in France as the strategic ones. French companies do not expect to receive a large share of SDI work. In fact, only a few contracts of modest size have been signed, so far, on the Continent. They believe that the strict U.S. regulations limiting technology transfer and the pressure upon Congress to restrict the Pentagon from awarding major contracts to overseas firms will prevent them from reaping significant financial benefits. SDI is attractive to them, however, because of the new fields of research involved: even small contracts involving cooperation with U.S. firms could yield valuable technological advances.

Some defense experts in the French Government and many in the private sector are concerned about the technological challenge presented by SDI; they believe that more active participation in SDI research is essential if France is to remain financially and technically capable of responding effectively to the strategic consequences of missile defense. There is also widespread interest in the possible benefits that such participation would bring to the civilian sector of the economy: advances in electronics, telecommunications, software, high-speed computers and artificial intelligence.<sup>11</sup> Executives of France's leading defense contractors do not believe that Mitterrand's refusal to sign a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the U.S. Government will disadvantage them with respect to British, West German and Italian companies in the competition for contracts. They are confident about their ability to produce competitively priced, high quality and technologically advanced products. The expertise they have to offer is principally in the fields of command, control, communications and information (C<sup>3</sup>I),<sup>12</sup> battle-management systems, penetration aids for missiles, lasers and optics.

The French are reluctant to sign an MOU with the United States, citing the West German experience as proof of an MOU's restricting character. According to François Heisbourg, Vice President of Thomson International, the Kohl government may have given away a valuable bargaining lever by endorsing SDI before negotiating the most favorable terms of its MOU with the U.S. Government. As a result, West German industry is tied "hand and foot" to the Americans because the U.S. Government has the right to determine which technologies are too sensitive to transfer as long as disputes over classification persist. West Germany has obliged itself to support SDI with no guarantee of receiving any new technologies in exchange for its endorsement.

Mitterrand wishes to be free from such restrictions: He launched the European Research Coordination Agency (EUREKA) project, a high-

technology program with primarily civilian applications, out of concern that SDI might deprive France of its best research scientists and that the Pentagon might treat French firms as subcontractors rather than as equal partners. Although this project takes a step in the right direction, the belief is widespread in France that EUREKA is a poor substitute for SDI because it combines the worst of several elements: insufficient public capital for investment in research; a high-risk factor for those firms which are participating; government regulations which stifle rather than promote entrepreneurship; and limited attention to applied technology.

"Cohabitation" has had little impact on France's policy towards SDI. While supporters of Chirac criticize Mitterrand for his stand on SDI, it is more the tone of his rhetoric than the substance of his position to which they object. Although Chirac openly endorses research on antimissile defense and would like to involve France more directly in SDI to exert greater influence over the program's direction, he opposes negotiating an MOU with the United States or giving *carte-blanc* support to Reagan's vision of replacing nuclear deterrence with a space-based antimissile shield. Nevertheless, if SDI evolves into a point defense of American ICBMs and, consequently, enhances rather than replaces deterrence, France after Mitterrand might become Europe's most enthusiastic supporter.

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### Notes

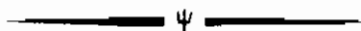
1. Based on an interview with François Fillon, defense spokesman of the RPR.
2. Based on an interview with President Giscard d'Estaing; see also John Fenske, "France and the Strategic Defence Initiative: Speeding up or Putting on the Brakes?" *International Affairs*, Fall 1986, pp. 240-242.
3. Michel Tatu, *Eux et Nous* (Paris: Fayard, 1985), p. 174.
4. Similar European views on SDI's negative implications for arms control and détente are well covered by David Yost, "European Anxieties about Ballistic Missile Defense," *Washington Quarterly*, Fall 1984, pp. 118-121.
5. See David Yost, *France's Deterrent Posture and Security in Europe*, pt. 1, Adelphi Papers, no. 194 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, Winter 1984-85), p. 22. When the single-warhead intermediate-range ground-launched ballistic missiles in Haute Provence are added to the 480 warheads of the 5 submarines equipped with M-4 missiles and the 16 warheads of the 1 submarine equipped with M-20 missiles, the total warhead count reaches 514. A seventh submarine equipped with the advanced multiple-warhead M-5 missile will probably enter service in 1994. (The Mirage bomber force will have been converted to a theater role by that time.) The number of warheads on land and sea available on very short notice for use in a retaliatory strike will be under 400.
6. Ivan Margine (pseudonym), "L'Avenir de la Dissuasion," *Défense Nationale*, April 1978, p. 10, as cited by Yost, *France's Deterrent Posture and Security in Europe*, pp. 23-24. On pages 20-26 Yost refers to some of these techniques of circumventing missile defenses but concludes that a significantly improved Soviet ABM network could seriously erode the credibility of the *force de frappe*.
7. Interview with François Heisbourg, Vice President of Thomson International, 13 June 1986.
8. Interview with Georges Fricaud-Chagnaud, Director of the Foundation for National Defense Studies, 12 June 1986. This view was expressed by top defense advisers to Mitterrand in the General Secretariat for National Defense.
9. Yost recounts in *France's Deterrent Posture and Security in Europe*, pp. 41-42, that a discussion took place in the French Government in the late 1970s about the pros and cons of shifting toward a more flexible targeting strategy. The concept was rejected because it would require a massive financial investment and buildup of both warheads and delivery vehicles. Yost cites Prime Minister Barre's conclusion that "For our

country, the problem of choosing between an anti-forces strategy and an anti-cities strategy does not arise." See Raymond Barre, "La Politique de Défense de la France," *Défense Nationale*, November 1980, p. 14.

10. Valedictory speech in May 1985 given by General Lacaze at the Institute for the Higher Study of National Defense, as reprinted in *Défense Nationale*, July 1985, p. 22 and cited by François Heisbourg on p. 91 in Andrew J. Pierre, ed., *The Conventional Defense of Europe: New Technologies and New Strategies* (New York: The Council on Foreign Relations of New York, 1986). The impact of increasingly accurate, low-yield Soviet missiles on the strategic doctrines of France and NATO is one of General Pierre-Marie Gallois' central concerns.

11. Interview with Jacques Battistella, technical adviser at MATRA, Paris, 16 June 1986.

12. The high level of French sophistication in this area was demonstrated when the U.S. Army chose to buy the RITA ground communications system instead of the British PTARMIGAN.



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