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Western European Nuclear Forces: a British, a French, and an American View

Nicholas Witney, Olivier Debouzy, Robert A. Levine

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Preface

This report on the future of the British and French nuclear forces is the product of a small study that began with an invitation to Nick Witney of the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defense to spend a year, beginning in the summer of 1993, participating in research and policy analysis at RAND in Santa Monica. Mr. Witney, whose Ministry of Defense positions have included staff responsibilities related to the British nuclear force, chose to focus his analysis on the future of that force. In March 1994, RAND invited Olivier Debouzy to Santa Monica for several weeks to work with Mr. Witney and others on issues relating to the two West European nuclear forces. M. Debouzy, currently an attorney in Paris, has been a staff member of the French Atomic Energy Agency, is concerned with military matters, and is an advisor to the Agency. The RAND staff monitor and participant in the study was Robert Levine, who was codirector of the Carnegie Corporation-sponsored RAND project on "Avoiding Nuclear War" and has written extensively on nuclear deterrence.

The three resulting papers are related to one another--both because they are based in part on intensive discussions during M. Debouzy's Santa Monica visit and because each of the authors has reviewed and commented on the other papers--but each paper can be read

independently. Each of them presents the views of its author; none in any way purports to represent official policy.

The work has been supported by RAND corporate funds and by Project AIR FORCE. The report is intended to be of use not only to those making decisions about British and French nuclear posture, but also to U.S. military and civilian policymakers concerned with such decisions on the part of America's closest allies, as well as those concerned more generally with the future nuclear shape of the world.

Summary

Each of the three papers that make up this report focuses on the question: What is the best rationale for the continued existence of the West European--British and French--nuclear forces in the post-cold war period? The three analyses are not symmetrical. The British and French papers discuss the specifics of their own forces, and in doing so come up with similar rationales, each of which invokes what both papers term a "European Vocation" for the two forces operating in increasingly close cooperation with one another. The American paper is based on a view of U.S. interests in these forces which values their retention but questions the European Vocation as the primary premise.

The three papers share a common structure, each providing a description of the past--the French paper with a more thoroughgoing description of a more complex past--as a basis for examining future alternatives. They also share the premise that it is in the *real* interests of not only Britain and France, but also of the United States and of international stability, that the British and French retain their forces. That is why the central issue throughout the report is not the real need, but rather the *rationale* for the forces, the set of arguments that will convince the electorates of the two countries that their

real interests dictate retention of their nuclear forces.

The three chapters of the report are:

The British Nuclear Deterrent--A European Vocation?

Nicholas Witney

This chapter reviews the history of the British nuclear force, which from the beginning was dedicated to NATO, with only an escape clause for independent British interests. With the end of NATO's original cold war mission, however, the need for the force is thrown into question. Current nuclear philosophies tend to one of two poles. Nuclear weapons are considered by some (including, according to the chapter, most Americans) to be an "Unmitigated Evil" (UE), whose only function is to make itself disappear, however long it may take to reach that goal. Others, however, believe the weapons to be a "Blessing in Disguise" (BD), whose existence and potential use *in extremis* stabilize the world against a Pandora's Box of other evils, including other weapons of mass destruction. The chapter takes the latter view, and thus searches for a rationale that can preserve the political basis for British nuclear forces' having this mission.

Rejecting several other alternatives, the chapter concludes that even after the end of the cold war, the European Vocation continues to provide the most robust rationale. It therefore explores means of reinvigorating that mission, in which British nuclear forces together with the French would provide a deterrent protecting all of Europe. The author discusses the limits on cooperation with France--constraining in such areas as warhead **design**, but generally quite broad; the need to satisfy the United States so as to maintain the viability of NATO; and questions that the Germans may raise about their nonnuclear role in sharing the direction as well as the benefits of the European Vocation.

A European Vocation for the French Nuclear Deterrent

Olivier Debouzy

The 1994 French White Paper on Defense marked the first significant turn away from traditional Gaullist nuclear doctrines, but, this analysis argues, the turn was not sharp enough. For General de Gaulle, the *force de frappe* had one overwhelming objective--to establish and protect French independence in world affairs. This meant establishing it outside of NATO, unlike the British force, in order to keep France independent of the United States; it meant an independent deterrent of Soviet action against Europe; and it was intended to mean an equal voice in world affairs with other nuclear powers. The nuclear force also contributed by becoming the central focus of the internal French consensus on defense. All this required a stated policy of *tous azimuts*--nuclear weapons which could be pointed in any direction, although the French, their allies, and their enemies all knew that the only real threat was from the East.

Tous azimuts had fallen into disuse after the end of the de Gaulle regime, but the White Paper revived it in a different way by admitting the end of the specific threat from the East and discussing nuclear forces as a deterrent/defense against a wider spectrum of lesser threats, including regional ones. However, this analysis suggests that in deference to President Mitterrand, who in recent years had become increasingly Gaullist in his defense policies, the White Paper pulled its punches. In particular, it still included many of the traditional formulas about French independence.

The analysis argues for a substantial abandonment of nuclear independence, substituting greatly increased cooperation with the British, built around the European Vocation. Like the British paper, it explores the technical limits of French/British cooperation, the importance of keeping

within a NATO context, and the need for bringing in the Germans and the difficulties in doing so. The French paper goes further, however, in advocating the use of these new nuclear policies to reconstruct both the Atlantic and the European political as well as military alliances on firmer bases.

An American View

Robert Levine

The American chapter reviews the initial lack of enthusiasm by the Kennedy administration and its advisors for British and French nuclear forces. In the early 1960s, many American experts feared that those forces would be militarily destabilizing. As the British and French forces developed over that decade and the subsequent ones, however, the United States recognized that nuclear forces were contributing to stability, and were perhaps even useful to the Atlantic Alliance and to the United States, at least politically, although American skepticism regarding their military utility continued.

In the post-cold war world, the central question for the United States remains: Where will these forces fall in the range of destabilizing/stabilizing/useful to U.S. interests? The chapter suggests that the U.S. interest most relevant to nuclear weapons is nuclear stability itself, including control over proliferation, an interest shared by the British and the French. Continuation of the European forces should be considered useful for this joint interest.

The central concern of the American paper, however, is with the rationales in each of the two European countries for continuation of their nuclear forces. The concern is not a strong one, because the paper suggests that with the major decisions already made and the costs for a substantial time period already incurred, inertia is likely to keep the forces in existence in any case. Little opposition is manifest any longer in Britain; in France there never was much. This makes

it tempting to continue to depend on inertia, either by not talking about new rationales or by explicitly rationalizing nuclear forces as a hedge against general worldwide uncertainty. Another option may be to **design** a more specific worldwide rationale: the paper suggests a joint policy by the United States, Britain, and France, and, if possible, Russia and China as well, to punish any first use of nuclear weapons. This may not be politically viable, however; perhaps a looser specific worldwide function can be substituted.

The American paper questions the European Vocation, as compared to the worldwide one, on the grounds that it is difficult to discover threats to Europe for which nuclear deterrence is relevant. The American critique suggests that the case made for the European Vocation by the British and French papers focuses on the utility of the Vocation for the internal cohesion of the European Union and indeed NATO, but has little to say about the external military functions of these military forces. For that reason, the paper fears, the British and/or French electorates might some day discover that these still-expensive military capabilities no longer have any real military functions, and might decide to do away with them.

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Abstract: Each of the three papers herein focuses on the question: What is the best rationale for the continued existence of the West European--British and French--nuclear forces in the post Cold War period? The British and French papers foresee the two forces operating in increasingly close cooperation. The British paper reviews the history of the UK's nuclear force and nuclear philosophies, searching for a rationale that can preserve the political basis for retaining this mission. The "European Vocation"--British and French forces providing a deterrent to protect all of Europe--provides the most robust rationale, with limits and needs. The French paper reviews the complex past of Gaullist nuclear doctrine and the recent White Paper suggesting changes in that doctrine. It recommends going even further than the White Paper by substantially abandoning nuclear independence and substituting increased cooperation with the British built around the "European Vocation." The American paper is based on a view that values retention of the forces but questions the two European rationales for doing so, on the grounds that a threat to Europe requiring nuclear deterrence is not apparent. It suggests that implicit or explicit inertia may provide enough of a rationale for force retention.

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