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A year ago, Nicolas Sarkozy spoke in Cherbourg

The Farce of France's Nuclear Strike Force

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It was just a year ago.

On 21 March 2008, the President of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, spoke in Cherbourg, on the occasion of the baptism (without immersion) of the submarine "*Le Terrible*" (SNLE-NG - new-generation missile-launching nuclear sub). In his speech he announced both a continued French effort to maintain her strike force and a number of French gestures in favour of disarmament. He returned also, though very discreetly, to a conception of France's "vital interests" - supposedly being protected by the nuclear "deterrent force" - which came close to the traditional Gaullist strategy (for which these vital interests tended implicitly to be the same as defending French territory) - much closer than had been the conception expounded on 19 January 2006 by President Jacques Chirac in his speech at l'Île Longue (he had implied that defense of "*vital interests*" by nuclear means could be triggered by anything from a terrorist attack backed by a foreign state to the defense of a friendly state through the breaking of our "*strategic provisioning*").

Now a year later the British PM, responsible for the other nuclear force in western Europe, has just given an [important speech in London, on Tuesday 17 March](#), in which he confirms Britain's wish to commit actively to a process of abolition of nuclear weapons. He had expressed this wish first on [21 January 2008 in Delhi](#); and the new president of the USA, [Barack Obama shares this wish](#).

Is it possible that Nicolas Sarkozy is on the same wavelength? High unlikely. A remarkable consistency can be seen, from the electoral declarations he sent to us in April 2007 to his letter of 5 December 2008 to the UN Secretary-General Mr Ban Ki-Moon (which did speak about nuclear disarmament, but not of French nuclear disarmament), and between-times in his solemn words in Cherbourg on 21 March 2008, which deserve serious analysis.

In that speech, President Sarkozy certainly did not announce the reduction "*of the French arsenal by a third*", as some believe, but only "*the reduction by a third of its airborne component*." That component then comprised, as far as we can as certain, about 60 ASMP missiles (air-to-ground medium-range) able to be equipped with nuclear warheads (fewer warheads than missiles) and carried by Mirage 2000N - or Super-Etendard planes on the aircraft-carrier "Charles-de-Gaulle". These planes have been or soon will be replaced by Rafales, some of which have been adapted to land on the "Charles-de-Gaulle" or her hypothetical sister-ship" (referred to as "l'Arlésienne").

The number of French warheads officially in service when President Sarkozy spoke in Cherbourg was 348:

1°) 3 lots of 96 intended for arming the 16 missiles on the 3 subs, with 6 warheads per missile (these being M45 missiles, which will be progressively replaced by M51s after 2010, starting with "Le Terrible"), which makes a total of 288 warheads each with a power of 100 kT ; and 2°) the 60 airborne TN81 warheads, with a power of 300 kT each. President Sarkozy stated in his speech that France has no nuclear warheads other than those "in service".

If, as seems probable, France replaces the 60 ASMP warhead-bearing missiles with 40 ASMP-A missiles (a version with enhanced range and precision), France will correspondingly reduce the number of nuclear warheads (enhanced also); in total, the number should then go from 348 to 328, which is a reduction of ... 5.7 % and not 30 %, as one [recently published article](#) might lead people to think.

Besides, this 30 % reduction in the "airborne component" could not by itself reduce France's total to "*less than 300 nuclear warheads*". Unless he deliberately exaggerated the reduction in number, the President either made a mistake or was led into error. No, there is another possible explanation for this discrepancy in numbers, much more plausible but impossible to uncover without breaching "defense secrecy": the total reduction by about fifty warheads could be achieved by a simultaneous reduction in the number of warheads on certain missiles on the subs - those that we

could call the "warning missiles".

In fact, six TN75 warheads of 100 kT each (7 to 8 times Hiroshima) are not only useless but even completely inappropriate for giving a *"final warning"*. Let us wager that each of those three lots of 16 (M45s then M51s) on board the subs after "Le Terrible" enters service (planned for 2010) will include at least two (and probably not more) "warning missiles" armed each with a single warhead (and doubtless several "decoys" which are nuclear warheads without explosive charge). This would make 10 warheads fewer and a total of 86 per sub. The result of this double reduction (in airborne and seaborne components) is this: $348 - 20 - (3 \times 10) = 298$. Or alternatively: $40 + (3 \times 86) = 298 = \text{"less than 300 warheads"}$. Q.E.D.

A reduction from 6 to 1 in the number of warheads on certain missiles was already the type of adaptation of "our deterrence tool" which Jacques Chirac adunbrated in his speech of 19 January 2006 at Ile Longue. It's a good bet that this is already the case or soon will be. Our enemies - yet to be identified - can take note.

One must point out, however, that one nuclear bomb, whether equal in power to 10-12 Hiroshimas (TN71) or to 7-8 Hiroshimas (TN75), is not better suited to the role of a simple "warning".

That is the objection we made [on 20 January 2008, the day after Chirac spoke](#): « *Thus, a single French nuclear weapon used against 'the power centres' (generally in the capital) of heads of states presumed to be accomplices of a terrorist attack against France will inevitably cause hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of deaths. That would be the 'disproportionate costs of their actions, for themselves and for their state'. And also for their populations, but our head of state carefully does not mention them probably because they are much less precious than the French population, or even our provisioning in oil and raw materials. That is the truth behind what he calls 'the flexibility and the reactivity of our strategic forces'. 'The choice will not be between inaction and annihilation', he also says. That is false: the choice will only be between annihilation of part of the population of a country declared evil and the annihilation of its entire population.* »

An improvised reply was made public shortly afterwards from the office of the then Defense Minister Mme Alliot Marie. So as to make the use of a big bomb plausible as a warning, it would be exploded above the enemy, but at a high altitude so as to limit its destructive effects to electromagnetic effects. As we can see, in French strategy all kinds of improvisation are good, provided they help us to hold on to our nuclear weapons.

The fact remains that having 3 lots of missiles and warheads on 4 submarines seems to imply (on the face of it) transferring at least one lot from one sub to another, which immobilises two subs during the transfer. At that moment only two of the four subs are operational. But since they have to relieve one another on missions at sea (usually 10-week missions) there is really only one permanently in service - provided it operates "with pressure-flow": the 4th SNLE, once loaded with weapons from the 3rd, relieves the 1st before the 2nd returns to Brittany to transfer its weapons to the 3rd, and so forth. But if the one on duty has an accident (for example an unfortunate chance encounter with a British sub, as in February 2009...) and therefore has to interrupt its mission early, perhaps even before being relieved, then there is no sub on duty to ensure the "strategic vigil": France is then left with no "Oceanic Strategic Force" and cannot reply from undersea to an attack against her *"vital interests"*. In this case, 4 subs + 3 lots of 16 missiles = zero seaborne warheads ready to launch. $4 + 48 = 0$: crazy arithmetic - and expensive peanuts.

Happily, in such a situation we'll at least have one of our airborne warheads, though we're not sure that it will hit its target: nobody knows with the plane or the missile might be intercepted and destroyed first. And it's even more random than that: no one can say whether the Super-Etendard or adapted Rafale for delivering the ASMP or ASMP-A will be able to take off from its aircraft-carrier: it could well be immobilised in Toulon harbour for repairs - as the Charles-de-Gaulle well knows. That is the case today in March 2009: what a catastrophe, the mighty Charles-de-Gaulle had to return hastily to port for several months at the very time when the sub *"Le Triomphant"* was

immobilised likewise for three months, after it scratched the "*HMS Vanguard*".

In this unprecedented situation, the *Mirage 2000* aircraft are all that remains to guard our "vital interests". Good luck to them. Several have already crashed during exercises.

To return to the sharing-out of warheads, there remains another hypothesis, hinted at by [the *Nouvel Observateur*](#) the day after the Cherbourg speech: when there are four SNLE-NG subs (once the new-generation sub "*Le Terrible*" enters service, as planned for 2010) the warheads will be shared equally between them, with 64 deployed on each sub and only 4 per missile (making 256 TN75s, supplemented by the 40 airborne warheads, adding up to 296 nuclear warheads in total).

In fact, although that is never stated anywhere, there will not be - not for a long time - more than three SNLE-NG subs in effective service. For this reason they will need only 3 lots of missiles. The plan is for the 3 subs currently in service (or at least in existence) - *Le Triomphant*, *le Téméraire*, *Le Vigilant* - to be gradually equipped with M51s, along with the future *Terrible*. The subs will therefore need to go into dry-dock in turn to undergo the considerable adaptations implied (M51s are larger than M45s). In other words, 4 subs paid for = 3 available. That solves the enigma of the 3 lots of missiles for 4 subs. This makes our first hypothesis even more probable, that of 3 lots of 86 (the figure that brings us closest to the overall ceiling of 300 warheads).

In the framework of this hypothesis, different forms of sharing-out are possible, other than that of 14 MIRV missiles with 6 warheads and 2 "warning missiles".

So, if each sub carries one "warning missile" with one warhead, the other 85 could be shared out in three different ways: 5 missiles with 5 warheads and 10 with 6; or else 1 with 5 missiles, 2 with 4 and 12 with 6; or else 1 with 3 missiles, 1 with 4 and 13 with 6. But those formulae are of no interest: it is useless to have some missiles with 3, 4 or 5 warheads, because they would be inappropriate for giving "an ultimate warning" and would lack their maximum potential for destruction. After all, the next step after "the warning" (if the warning is unheeded or provokes a counter-attack against our "vital interests"...) is supposed to be the massive destruction of enemy cities and centres.

Furthermore, one cannot decide in advance the number of warheads on each missile by referring to the number and positions or their targets, since for the moment we lack a designated enemy or any "targeted" missiles (officially at least, France has neither).

On the other hand, it is very useful to have at least two "warning missiles" available (but no more: a third would cause the total number on the subs to drop below 15) so as to compensate for a possible misfire of the first, or to deliver a second "warning" to the same enemy or another.

From all this, we can conclude that:

- [-] 1. Our fleet of SNLE subs, although it will grow to four in 2010, will have only 3 in active service, until an uncertain date depending on the adaptation work of the existing subs so that that they can carry M51s.
- [-] 2. Beyond that date, France will face an almost insoluble problem: having a sub too many (for this missile-launcher will have no missiles to launch); or else transferring warheads from one sub to another, thus reducing to two the operational subs (hypothesis 1); or else sharing them around the 4 subs, thus reducing the firepower of each missile and each sub (hypothesis 2); or sending the whole fleet to the scrapyard, under pressure from the international community which meanwhile, in spite of France, will have progressed towards the abolition of nuclear arsenals;
- [-] 3. In any case, 3 subs in service = 1 on permanent vigil, or two at best, or zero in the worst case (accidents, mishaps, captains' appendicitis and deputy's depression);
- [-] 4. Every sub will have on board, in all probability, 86 nuclear warheads (TN75s - or TNO if that programme is not already finally cancelled), instead of the 96 initially projected;
- [-] 5. These 86 warheads will be shared around 16 missiles, with 6 on each, except for two with only 1 each;

[-] 6. This is probably already the case;

[-] 7. If a French citizen external to the army, navy, diplomatic corps or ruling elite can draw these conclusions, it is likely that the salaried analysts of foreign powers can do so too. If this is correct, this "defense secret" is a farce.

Whatever the case, the virtuous "disarmament effort" which France is putting forwards corresponds in fact to a financial imperative. It would be too onerous to replace the current Mirages and Super-Etendards with the same number of Rafales: these are so expensive that Dassault and France have not managed to sell a single one abroad. In his speech of 21 March 2008, President Sarkozy guaranteed that the defense budget would not be reduced as a proportion of GDP, but emphasised that painful choices would have to be made along with a strong downward revision in the equipment programmes adopted already: to implement them all would have meant an annual increase of 6 billion euros, which is "40 % of the annual equipment budget" of the armed forces. This was described as "a wall".

We can deduce from that sagacious observation by the President that the equipment budget for the armed forces amounts, all by itself, to 15 billion euros per year. The costs of equipping the strike force (excluding costs of operation and maintenance) amount, according to the President, to "half the justice budget or half the budget of the Ministry of Transport". Indeed, our chocolate peanuts cost us big lolly!

Reducing the number of new ASMP-A missiles is also a move in the direction of financial realism. So is the reduction in warheads, inasmuch as it makes possible considerable savings in maintenance while reserving what is called "strict sufficiency".

Having an explosive charge equal to at least 46 800 000 tonnes of TNT, the 348 warheads in service in 2008 (and perhaps today also) could cause between 700 and 900 million deaths, if we take Hiroshima as a yardstick. Now if France - a nation skilled in making a virtue of necessity and presenting her decisions in a favourable light - now reduces her warheads by fifty, the number of people she will then be able to kill, in the name of defending her "vital interests" and, incidentally, human rights, will be only 500-600 million individuals. That is barely half the population of China or India, though it is still the sum of Russia plus the USA (let's not mention the Iranians, they would all die). All the same, this is ten times the figure that de Gaulle used to dream of. Surely that should suffice. President Sarkozy has often emphasised his liking for "strict sufficiency".

As for the thought of one day renouncing her "deterrent force" completely through a disarmament process where France would sit at the negotiations table, **that is out of the question.** The real divergence of views between the UK and France, which could be discerned in January 2008 with Brown's speech in Delhi, is now being confirmed. And even the new orientation which President Obama is giving to US nuclear policy is not likely to reduce it.

This has to be said (it should be said especially at the Elysee Palace): France will be obliged sooner or later - especially after reintegration into NATO - to conduct a painful revision of her position. That is unless, of course, the tension between Russia and the US over the anti-missile shield in central Europe and NATO's eastward expansion were to increase and lead to a new arms race - and thus postpone till Judgement Day the implementation of Article VI of the NPT. The only hope of survival for France's deterrent force is therefore an increase in international tension. Objectively, on this matter, President Sarkozy is not an ally of the Obama administration but an enemy. And no friend of peace or international détente.

On the other hand, Nicolas Sarkozy should be able to agree with Gordon Brown about nuclear power-plants, since they both believe in the benefits of "Atoms for Peace" and in human ability to spread these around while keeping them under control. For the summer, Gordon Brown is promising us a route-map for progress towards a world with no nuclear weapons but with lots of nuclear plants. [Sorry, this is nonsense.](#) That will be a grand sight to see: a radioactive oxymoron!

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