

Force de frappe has now become obsolete

by Philip Golub

There is still no sign that the French government has understood the implications of President Reagan's March 23 speech on Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) technologies or that it is responding to technological and political imperatives. In the midst of a crisis unfolding between the two superpowers, France will have to choose between survival in the laser age or the tactics and technologies of an already obsolete MAD era.

Unfortunately, if the new long-term defense policy the government proposed is to be taken seriously, it appears that budgetary restraints and ideological considerations are currently overruling strategic reality. Debate on the military proposals began in the National Assembly on May 19.

There are two primary aspects of the international strategic situation which affect French national security: 1) the rapid advances made both in the U.S.S.R. and the United States on BMD laser technologies, with early applications expected within three to five years; and 2) the Cuban-missile-style showdown between the superpowers precipitated by Andropov's consolidation of power and official Soviet rejection of President Reagan's proposal for parallel U.S.-Soviet development of space-based ABM systems. France must prepare for both.

France's nuclear *force de frappe* is already militarily obsolete in its present mode of deployment. The massive introduction of highly precise SS-20 missiles has rendered the Plateau d'Albion site vulnerable to a Soviet first strike with an intermediate range missile. The French bomber fleet would have little chance of effectively penetrating Soviet defenses unless it were equipped with laser technologies capable of repelling anti-aircraft missile attack; and the strategic submarine forces are constantly "tracked" and vulnerable to a first strike strategy.

Hence the *force de frappe*'s previous capability to threaten intolerable losses in Russian population centers is no longer effective.

The introduction of Pershing II missiles in Europe does not remedy France's predicament. The Pershings give the United States the capability—if it so desires—to strike Soviet territory in response to an SS-20 preemptive strike, but does

not restore to France the mastery of its own destiny. When the *force de frappe* was initially introduced it was with the aim of giving France—and implicitly Europe—an independent deterrence. "Would Jimmy Carter have gone to war for Bonn?" is a legitimate question raised in European quarters.

The SS-20 should thus have forced a redefinition of French nuclear strategy to a *launch-on-warning policy* which, though apparently aggressive, is the way to ensure the survival of French strategic forces.

Launch-on-warning is precisely the policy that the Russians have announced they will adopt once the Pershing II missiles are deployed in Europe. On the Russian end, it implies that the entire Soviet strategic arsenal will be launched whenever any threat of launch from the other side is perceived, even in case of accidental firing. For France to safeguard its nuclear forces, it must be ready and able to launch the entirety of its strategic arsenal at moment zero-plus-one of the sighting of a missile attack.

The five- to eight-minute flight time of Russian IRBMs renders any other policy impracticable—except surrender. A launch-on-warning policy will make the *force de frappe* "survivable" for a couple of years more if peace is maintained in the world.

Within 5 to 10 years, and perhaps even sooner, the *force de frappe* will be technologically entirely obsolete, as laser and particle beam defenses are deployed by the superpowers. Professor M. Felden, head of the plasma physics laboratory at the University of Nancy, correctly observed at a recent conference in Paris that the planned increases in the French ICBM and submarine-launched ballistic missile forces will be largely meaningless after 1984 unless a massive effort is made to develop the new BMD laser technologies. "What will be the use of a new submarine planned for 1984 when it will be destroyed [by laser technologies]," he asked.

Studies by the French and other military forces on the implications of the Malvinas war have corrupted strategic thinking in France: the coming conflict is a superpower showdown and a technological race, not a series of limited wars in the developing sector (though these are not to be excluded).

Second, despite the commitment of the government to maintain the French nuclear arsenal, a strategy for its survival has not been worked out.

Hence the scent of the *Air Land 2000* report of NATO commander Gen. Bernard Rogers permeates the government's programs. The document, a plan for conducting depopulation and resource-control wars in the developing sector, is the counterpole to current official White House thinking. Electronics gadgetry and conventional forces are made supreme at the expense of those weapons systems which will destroy even the most sensitive and advanced electronics.

Budgetary constraints are determining strategic thinking, rather than strategic reality dictating allocations. Such was the fate of France's political and military elite in the late 1930s, when it sought to fight according to the methods of World War I.