

Report from Paris by Joëlle Leconte

A shift in the prime minister's office

While France is handling Soviet aggression with kid gloves, Mauroy has called for study of beam weapons.

Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy told an audience of defense specialists Sept. 20 that they must confront "the new challenge . . . the perspective of defensive strategic systems development"—the beam-weapons defense systems now under development in both the United States and the Soviet Union.

This is the first time a senior French government official has indicated that France will consider the possibilities of a domestic beam-weapons program.

Speaking at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de la Défense Nationale in Paris, Mauroy declared: "Significant progress has been achieved in recent years in the domain of laser beam weapons and the use of space. The Soviets and the Americans are pursuing research in these fields. The project considered by the United States, even if its realization is over the long term, nevertheless raises strategic problems."

The prime minister's office confirmed that France will investigate the new military technology. But, as in the case of the neutron bomb, military policy decisions would not be made before feasibility and cost estimation studies are completed.

Before Mauroy's speech, official comments on the possibility of a beam weapons development program, especially from the foreign ministry, have been highly skeptical or outright hostile. Since the Soviet decision to shoot down the KAL airliner Sept. 1,

the French government has bent over backward to avoid any affront to Moscow. The newspaper *Libération* reported that the foreign minister privately viewed the KAL 7 incident as merely a "gaffe" on the part of both the South Korean plane's pilot and the Soviet air force!

The same attitude was displayed when a civilian plane belonging to Air France, flying slightly off-course in the corridor from West Germany to Berlin, was recently chased and even, quite unusually, shot at by the Soviet air force. This happened at the end of August, several weeks before the Korean airline incident, and was probably a test of Western reactions.

French authorities demanded that the West German government, which witnessed the whole incident, keep it under wraps. Then the Quai d'Orsay put out an official denial that the incident had ever taken place.

While trying not to ruffle the Russians, the foreign ministry has expressed growing impatience with the American administration. Interviewed on national television, Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson repudiated American military activity in Lebanon. The shelling by American forces around Beirut is "not the best method" to solve the Lebanese crisis, he said.

Cheysson reintroduced the idea expressed by Defense Minister Charles Hernu at the United Nations, that the international community and the U.N.

should take more responsibility in Lebanon—an evident attempt to extricate France from Lebanon.

The French foreign ministry has attempted through most of the present crises—in Chad, Lebanon, and in East-West relations—to define a "third way" between the superpowers.

Yet the military realities on the ground in Lebanon swept the diplomats aside, as French Super Etendard jet fighters attacked Druze militia positions in Lebanon Sept. 22, in retaliation for bombing of French forces in Beirut. This was the first time the French had become directly involved in the current round of fighting. Once French troops were attacked, there was no alternative but to fire back.

The shift by Prime Minister Mauroy on the beam weapons issue follows extensive organizing by the Comité de la France et son Armée (Committee of France and Its Army), whose call for support for President Reagan's beam defense policy and the adoption of a similar policy in France has circulated widely. The committee includes leading retired military officers, and former fighters in the wartime Resistance.

Its call was recently endorsed by Edouard Frederic-Dupont, a deputy from the 7th Paris arrondissement close to the conservative opposition party, the RPR. National Assembly defense committee member Jean Brocard made a similar call for the United States to counter Soviet strategic moves with a commitment to beam-weapons development.

The weekly magazine *Minute* was recently the only national-circulation publication to emphasize, in a two-page feature story, that the Americans consider deployment by the Americans of beam weapons "a *casus belli*" and a pretext for a preventive nuclear strike.