

France: high stakes in 1988 elections

by Philip Golub

French voters will go to the polls in just over five months in what will undoubtedly be one of the most important elections in French and European postwar history. Inevitably, the gradual process of American disengagement and retrenchment following the Intermediate Nuclear Force (INF) accord, has focused attention on Western Europe and the upcoming French presidential elections in particular. International security affairs and foreign policy are going to play a greater role than in most previous presidential contests. Furthermore, the result of the election will shape European defense and security policies for the next decade.

The INF accord, foreshadowed by the Reykjavik summit in 1986, is forcing France, as Europe's principal nuclear power, to redefine and expand its strategic commitments. Since March 1986 in particular, the government of Premier Jacques Chirac has engaged France in a program of military build-up focused primarily on the modernization and expansion of France's nuclear strike forces. The 1987-91 defense budget allows for a 40% increase in expenditures on military equipment.

Intensive military modernization

The military budget, by the end of the five-year plan, will account for over 4% of French Gross National Product, in contrast to other European nations. Government statements following the signing of the INF accord indicate that this effort will be intensified.

The modernization effort includes:

- Research and development, said to be near completion, of a land-based mobile ballistic missile, the S4, with high penetration power (shielding of the warheads against first-generation Soviet ABM systems).
- Deployment of a new, highly accurate MIRVed submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), the M4, on France's planned fifth nuclear submarine, and the retrofitting of its existing submarine forces. Deployment is expected by the middle to late 1990s.
- Deployment of the short-range Hades nuclear missile, and probably, though not yet officially announced, of enhanced radiation ("neutron bomb") artillery.

In addition, French laboratories, though insufficiently

funded, are engaged in highly specialized work on lasers and masers.

At the same time, the INF accord, and the prospect of further Soviet-American disarmament agreements, have led French government leaders to seek to expand European defense cooperation. Premier Chirac, as early as December 1986, made a remarkable call at a meeting of the West European Union for expanded European defense cooperation, while warning against any agreements "which would compromise Euro-American coupling" in the Atlantic Alliance.

Since March 1986, France has intensified efforts in this direction. Most recently this has led to important and regular Franco-British nuclear consultations. In spite of serious dissonances in many areas of international security policy (over the Mideast and Europe in particular), the French and British military establishments are presently studying a joint project for a middle-range airborne cruise missile (ALCM) and expanded nuclear cooperation.

On the other hand, the French government has recently publicly committed itself to the unilateral defense of the Federal Republic of Germany, in case of Warsaw Pact aggression. Spain and the Netherlands have expressed their desire to join Franco-German consultations on European defense. (The cooperation with the United Kingdom appears, unfortunately, limited to nuclear issues.)

In short, France has become the motor of European defense efforts, and remains the only country capable of continuing to play such a significant role. It must also be noted that over the past two years, Franco-American cooperation has been vastly expanded in a number of domains, including Chad, northern Africa, anti-terrorist efforts, and intelligence.

The stakes of the presidential elections are thus very high. Though it is too early for a precise prognosis, the main trends are already defined. There is no uncertainty on the "right": The primaries of early May will pit Premier Chirac against ex-Premier Raymond Barre, a longstanding member of the Trilateral Commission, and Jean Marie Le Pen of the National Front. Though recent polls show Chirac marginally trailing Barre, experts in France expect Chirac to take the lead once the election campaign actually begins. Chirac's campaign is to be led by Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, who has proven his organizational abilities. Le Pen, who crested earlier in 1987, has slid back over the past months, though he is expected to be able to swing votes on the second round of the elections.

The results depend, however, on the one great uncertainty of the campaign: Will President François Mitterrand run? Apparently tired and desirous of playing a role as a European elder statesman, Mitterrand may not run for a second term.

Though they are adversaries, Premier Chirac, the neo-Gaullist, and President Mitterrand, the Socialist, have arrived at a consensus in foreign policy affairs and are said to share a great dislike for Raymond Barre. The patterns will emerge with clarity in January.