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Sarkozy and French nuclear deterrence

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Summary

French President Nicolas Sarkozy has made a clear commitment to retain a reduced but modernized strategic nuclear force, and presented an 8-point disarmament plan to the international community focused on reduced numbers and alert status, a fissile material cut-off, a test ban and greater transparency. He outlined these steps in his first speech on French nuclear deterrence policy, when launching the fourth new nuclear ballistic missile submarine *Le Terrible* (translated as "The Fearsome") on March 21, 2008.

He confirmed the French attachment to the policy of nuclear deterrence, describing it as the nation's life insurance policy, and a contribution to European security in the face of the looming threat of a nuclear-armed Iran. At the same time, he announced a unilateral reduction in the arsenal to less than 300 warheads, saying that this reflected a decline in the risks and the threats France faces. He also presented an eight-point multilateral nuclear disarmament plan for discussion between the nuclear weapon states. This comes at a time of high-paced modernization in all elements of the French nuclear arsenal, the largest in Europe and the fourth in the world.

The modernization of the French nuclear arsenal

The French nuclear arsenal has two components: the FOST - Force Océanique Stratégique (Strategic Oceanic force) and the FAS - Force Aérienne Stratégique (Strategic Air force). All elements of the warheads and their missiles will have been renewed between 2008 and 2015. The forthcoming Defence Ministry publication, the "White Book" (le Livre Blanc, July 2008), should specify the elements of the French strategic forces.

The Strategic Oceanic Force (FOST) comprises four submarines, though currently only three are operational (*Le Triomphant*, *Le Téméraire*, *Le Vigilant*), deploying M-45 missiles. The fourth, launched by President Sarkozy in March and named *Le Terrible*, will be operational in 2010, and will be the first to be equipped with the new M-51 missile (with a range of 6000 to 8000 km). The other three will receive M-51s over the following five years. Each submarine carries up to sixteen missiles, and each missile can be equipped with up to six nuclear warheads maximum.

TN-75 (150 kt). President Chirac announced in January 2006 that "the number of nuclear warheads has been reduced on some missiles in our submarines". The M-51 will carry a new nuclear warhead (the TNO). The total number of warheads within the submarine force will be 249. FOST also includes six *Rubis* class nuclear attack submarines, to protect the aircraft carrier, the strategic nuclear submarines and conduct research and intelligence. The *Rubis* class is slated for replacement the *Barracuda* class in 2017.

The Strategic Air Forces (FAS) have existed since 1964. These will now comprise forty land-based Mirage 2000-N bombers shortly to deploy the new stand-off ASMP-A missile each with the new TNA warhead, and ten dual-purpose *Super Etendard Modernisés* fighter-bombers based upon the nuclear aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* and armed with ASMP missiles. The first Rafale F3 will come into service with the FAS in 2010.

France continues its nuclear test simulation program, started in 1994 to realize, test and assure the safety of its future nuclear warheads. The principal element of this program is the Laser Mégajoule (LMJ, a system with similarities to the US National Ignition Facility), based at Barp, near Bordeaux, and planned to be operational in 2012.

Sarkozy announced cuts in nuclear arsenal

It is a convenient moment, therefore, for the President to declare an "adjustment" of French nuclear forces to reflect changed realities, according to the "principle of strict sufficiency", in a display of unprecedented transparency. He announced a reduction by a third "of nuclear weapons, missiles and planes" for the airborne component, with the result that "the French arsenal will include less than 300 nuclear warheads" (a reduction of around 50), declared for the first time that France has "no other weapons than those in its operational stocks", and confirmed a 1997 announcement that French missiles would not be targeted and that their alert status would be reduced.

The reduction in the arsenal by roughly fifty warheads will free up about 200 kg of plutonium and 1250 kg of highly enriched uranium. In a demonstration of France's commitment not to produce more fissile material, and to invite other states to follow France's lead, President Sarkozy invited "international experts to come to note the dismantling of our installations of Pierrelatte and Marcoule". A Foreign Ministry official has argued that "this invitation shows the willingness of France to promote the transparency in its efforts at disarmament in an unequalled way". The international observers could include members of the IAEA or independent experts. No concrete plan or calendar for such visits has been developed so far, but it is likely that the first visits could take place in 2009.

Multilateral nuclear disarmament plan

President Sarkozy announced an eight-point action plan:

- Universal ratification of the CTBT
- Transparent and verifiable dismantling of all nuclear testing sites

- Immediate opening of negotiations in the CD on a fissile material cut-off treaty (FMCT)
- Immediate international moratorium on fissile material production
- Agreement between the P5 on transparency measures
- Start negotiating to ban short and medium range ground-to-ground missiles
- International implementation of the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCOOC)
- "Mobilization in all other fields of disarmament"

Alongside this action plan, the French Defence and Foreign Ministries have launched a charm offensive outlining France's record since the Cold War and calling on fellow nuclear weapon states to cooperate in negotiating in these areas. It remains to be seen how these challenges will be taken up, or whether they will join the many other proposals that have been neglected.

Jean-Marie Collin is an independent consultant in France. His area of expertise covers French nuclear weapons, nuclear proliferation, arms control and cluster munitions. He collaborates with different NGOs (Greenpeace, Handicap International, International Panel on Fissile Materials) or French think tanks (Observatory of Armaments, etc.). He has written numerous reports and articles, notably on naval nuclear propulsion, French nuclear deterrence, nuclear disarmament, and cluster munitions systems.