

note n°10/2015

June 1, 2015

FONDATION
pour la RECHERCHE
STRATÉGIQUE

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Deterrence according to François Hollande

Résumé

Le Président de la République a prononcé le 19 février 2015 un discours sur la dissuasion nucléaire. S'il ne comprend aucune annonce majeure, il recadre notre politique nucléaire, la détaille davantage que ne l'avait fait le *Livre blanc de 2013*, apporte à cet égard des précisions importantes sur la doctrine et la posture françaises, et fait état de quelques inflexions.

Abstract

On the February 19, 2015, the President of the Republic gave a speech on nuclear deterrence. Although it did not contain any major announcements, it reaffirms our nuclear policy while further elaborating upon it – something that the 2013 White Paper did not do – and in this respect provides significant clarifications on French doctrine and posture, and mentions several instances of reorientation.



The President of the French Republic's speech on the 19th February 2015 contained nothing revolutionary. That said, it did contain several clarifications and adjustments that makes an analysis of it worthwhile.

The first merit of such a speech is simply to exist: France is the only Western nuclear State (and one of the only countries with a military nuclear capability) in which the Head of State or Government devotes an entire public speech to nuclear deterrence, on average once every five years. This tradition is a precious one, firstly for the credibility of deterrence, which supposes a clear commitment on the part of the authorities “to whom it may concern”; also for the motivation of everyone, especially within the armed forces and industry, who works on the French nuclear force; and finally for democracy, given that the very existence of this supreme power implies, at the very least, that the person who holds it speaks regularly to the people that elected him and conferred this power upon him. It also provides an opportunity to underline the fact

that terrorism is not the only potential threat that France is facing, that the nature of the office means that the President of the Republic should have a broad vision both temporally and geographically - the mention of the worrying development of Asian nuclear arsenals highlights that some of the countries in question have, or will one day possess, the means of reaching our territory.

The strategic landscape that the President outlined justifies, in his view, retaining and ensuring the continued existence of the French deterrence force. Mr Hollande refrained, however - unlike what is often the case in other countries - from naming the States likely to be concerned. Such discretion avoids futilely inflaming diplomatic relations with certain countries (for instance, France's role in the attempts to resolve the Ukraine crisis comes to mind), and uselessly establishing an artificial distinction between "concerned" and "unconcerned" countries. By definition, deterrence is aimed at any State that may have the ability or the desire to attack our vital interests.

Mr Hollande's comments on the technological developments that are likely to upset the strategic order should also be noted. Regarding States with nuclear capabilities, one indeed wonders about the possibility that cybernetic means, notably, could one day be used to completely paralyse a State's ability to function - a situation that could be fall within the scope of nuclear deterrence. (Curiously, the third traditional element of the core of our vital interests, the freedom to exercise our sovereignty, was not mentioned in the speech, although the preservation of the "freedom of action" was cited several times.)

In spite of the continued debate on the relevance of deterrence, which takes various forms (such as the 2009 Prague speech, and the international conferences on the so-called "humanitarian dimension" starting in 2012...), our country does not feel even remotely threatened, politically speaking, by any kind of pressure in this field. However, certain voices are sometimes raised in France to contest the amount of nuclear spending, for example. It is partly for this reason that Mr Hollande wished to express himself on the justifications for France's possession of an independent deterrence force.

The President thus explained that "*France is one of the few countries in the world whose influence and responsibility is felt on a global scale*". Implicitly, that means that from the

point of view of the legitimacy (rather than the legality) of the possession of nuclear weapons, our country is better placed than others...

In keeping with the contents of the 2013 White Book (for the first time in a high-level official document), Mr Hollande's speech also lists the capability, technological, and industrial benefits of maintaining deterrence. It is precisely because she is a nuclear power - and above all an independent nuclear power - that France conserves a significant amount of key capabilities (imagery satellites, SSNs, refuelling aircraft, ASW frigates, mine counter-measure vessels, maritime patrol aircraft...), and that she has the ability to conduct long-distance bombing operations without prior notice (Mali...). It is also for this reason that France's defence industry is so efficient in highly demanding technology fields.

Mr Hollande also indicated in no less uncertain terms that, contrary to suggestions denouncing an allegedly complete budgetary "ring-fencing" of the French deterrent, it was in no way exempt from the financial effort asked of the nation today. It is precisely in the name of sufficiency that it has been decided, among other measures (such as, for instance, putting back the commissioning of the M51.2 to 2016), not to develop a new missile, but instead to replace the M51.2 at the end of its life cycle with an "M51.3". Consequently, as the President underlined, the next generation of SSBNs will have a very similar tonnage to that of current vessels. In the same vein, Mr Hollande also confirmed that France would not produce "*any new type of weapon*". Moreover, he mentioned the successor of the ASN4G aerobic missile, which will be developed when the time comes (it will probably be a hypersonic missile, to evade anti-air defences from the middle of the century). France has positioned herself in a "maintenance" mode rather than a "modernisation" mode, strictly speaking, of the two components, which are meant to be complementary and reactive.

This mind-set of continuity is also in evidence regarding doctrinal and political issues. The President used the expression "*extreme circumstances of legitimate self-defence*", inherited from the previous presidency, (and which allowed France to claim to be consistent with the 1996 opinion of the International Court of Justice). Mr Hollande also employed classic French language on "negative security assurances", which are commitments of non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear States, with the traditional caveat according to

which Paris would be released from these commitments should the country in question not be compliant with its non-proliferation commitments. (In this respect, France's language differs slightly from that used by its US and UK allies, insofar as nuclear proliferation is not the only type of proliferation in question.) This is the first time that these points have been affirmed at the highest level.

The French forces should be capable of inflicting "absolutely" unacceptable damage, but it is not certain that this adverb (previously employed by Jacques Chirac in 2001) will have any practical ramifications in terms of planning. Continuity is also in evidence as to the type of targets: the adversary's centres of power, or indeed (this is a clarification rather than a doctrinal shift) "*nerve centres*", namely facilities that are particularly sensitive or valuable for political, economic, or military authorities. But, unlike his predecessor, Mr Hollande did not say that French deterrence targets these power centres "*as a priority*". The nuance is not insignificant... The concept of final warning remains relevant. (The President did not mention its "final" character, but it was recalled by the Defence Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, in a speech in November 2014.)

In terms of transparency, France is persisting with what is now a well-established tradition; she has confirmed that she only possesses three lots of ballistic missiles for her SSBNs, and has announced the number of ASMPA delivery systems in her possession (54). These 54 delivery systems are not "missiles"; the number of nuclear weapons available for this common pool for the Strategic Air Forces (FAS) and the Aero-Naval Nuclear Force

(FANu) is of course lower. This announcement is not negligible, but the fact that the President was not willing to go further is regrettable - in 1994 his far-removed predecessor, François Mitterrand, publicly gave details of all of the technical characteristics of the French nuclear forces... But an effort towards transparency can be noted regarding facilities; Paris will open up the former Plateau d'Albion site and the Luxeuil air-force base (which is now non-nuclear) to international visits.

Finally, in order to demonstrate, if a demonstration were needed, France's desire to see a Fissile Material Cut-Off Treaty concluded as soon as possible, Mr Hollande announced that Paris would soon establish a draft text that will be put to the international community.

The President chose to focus on continuity. This should be applauded insofar as this confirms that this field, a matter of national sovereignty par excellence, and the apex of political responsibility, generally remains exempt from political controversy. It can also be feared that a certain French conservatism could give rise to accusations of inaction (and this in spite of the fact that nuclear policy is subject to regular evaluations at the highest level of State). In any case, instruction but also open debate will be needed so that the precious "French consensus on deterrence" can continue to exist. This will especially be the case as soon as our country prepares to begin a new programme cycle aimed at ensuring the continued existence of the deterrence force, which will mechanically mean an increase in nuclear spending within a structurally constrained defence budget.◇

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The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone

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ISSN : 2273-4643

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