

# French president Chirac threatens nuclear retaliation in the event of terrorist attacks

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21 January 2006

The French president, Jacques Chirac, has threatened states which support terrorist attacks on France and its strategic interests, or which contemplate the use of weapons of mass destruction, with retaliatory nuclear strikes. He announced this new definition of French defence strategy on Thursday at the nuclear powered submarine base, Ile Longue in Brittany.

In a major defence policy speech, Chirac said: “The nuclear deterrent is not intended to deter fanatical terrorists. But the leaders of states who use terrorist methods against us, as well as those who consider using in one way or another weapons of mass destruction, must understand that they would expose themselves to a firm and appropriate response on our part. This response could be a conventional one. It might also be of a different kind.”

Among those interests to be protected the president included “the guarantee of our strategic supplies and the defence of allied countries.” In this respect the president is obliged to estimate whether “the extent and the possible consequences of a threat or an intolerable extortion fall ... into the field of our vital interests”.

Chirac expressly warned “certain states” which attempt to equip themselves “with nuclear weapons and do so by breaking agreements”—an unmistakable warning to Iran, which France, the European Union and the US accuse of building nuclear weapons.

France has an estimated 300 nuclear warheads which—unlike British nuclear weapons—are not subject to the control of NATO. Since the rule of French President Charles de Gaulle, the so-called *force de frappe* nuclear strike force has been regarded as a symbol of French strength and independence (also against the US) and has been carefully protected as a prestige project by all French presidents.

This also applied to the Socialist Party president, François Mitterrand, whose term of office saw the sinking by the French secret service of a Greenpeace ship which was taking part in a protest against French nuclear weapons tests in the South Pacific. Immediately after beginning his term of office, Chirac resumed such tests on the Mururoa atoll in

1995—until being forced to stop after substantial international protests.

According to France’s doctrine up to now, the *force de frappe* was exclusively seen as a response to a threat to the territorial integrity, population and sovereignty of France. Its purpose was to deter a potential opponent, which in the event of a hostile attack, would have to reckon with its complete destruction.

Now, however, Chirac has clearly lowered the threshold for the use of nuclear weapons. The endangerment of the supply of strategic raw materials to France, or the bare threat of weapons of mass destruction, is now sufficient to justify their use.

Chirac still continues to maintain a strategy based on deterrence. “There is no question of using nuclear weapons in conflicts for military purposes,” he said. It concerns the “credible threat of their use” and thereby, “Making clear to leaders who have hostile intentions towards us of the immense costs which their actions have for themselves and their states.”

At the same time Chirac explained that, since the end of the cold war, France had converted its nuclear forces in such a way that they could now be used against selected strategic targets under the existing threshold of total destruction.

“Against a regional power, we should not have to choose between inaction and obliteration,” he said. “The flexibility and reactivity of our strategic forces should allow us to respond directly against his power centres, against his capacity to act. All our nuclear forces have been reconfigured accordingly. To this end, the number of warheads has been reduced on some missiles on our submarines.”

It is obvious that the possibility of undertaking deliberate attacks against selected targets raises the probability of an actual use of nuclear weapons. For some time the US has been working on the development of tactical nuclear weapons, which can be also be used in the context of conventional wars, in order to eliminate strategic goals or rebellious regions.

Chirac's threats must therefore be taken seriously. The ruling class of France, which has a long history of imperialist crimes and bloody colonial wars, would not be deterred from the nuclear devastation of large areas if it saw its "vital interests" endangered.

Chirac concretely referred to these interests in his speech. He described "the division of raw materials, the distribution of natural resources and the development of a demographic equilibrium" as "new sources of imbalance." To put it another way: Chirac is prepared to use nuclear weapons in order to restore the "equilibrium" and secure the supply of raw materials and natural resources to France.

The direct object of Chirac's threats is Iran, which has great strategic importance for France and other European powers. The country is one of the world's biggest oil and gas producers and is an important sales market for the European economy. In addition, Iran is strategically situated between the Persian Gulf and Caspian Sea, Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent.

Chirac announced his new defence doctrine shortly after the breakdown of negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program. After Great Britain, Germany and France failed to force Teheran to voluntarily give up its nuclear program they are now seeking to refer Iran to the United Nations Security Council. This could initiate a spiral of conflict beginning with sanctions and other coercive measures leading eventually to military confrontation.

After repeated threats by the US and Israel to more or less openly launch military strikes against Iranian nuclear plants, France is now trying to win back the initiative with its own independent threat of nuclear attacks.

In this respect it is clear that Chirac is not prepared to be outdone by US President Bush when it comes to the defence of his country's own imperialist interests. The French government—alongside Germany—did not oppose the Bush war against Iraq out of consideration for international law or any abhorrence of the brutal aggression by the US, but because it saw its own imperialist interests endangered.

The past weeks have witnessed a series of reports over the close cooperation between the German, French and American secret services. Although the French and the German government publicly spoke out against the Iraq war and criticized American violations of human rights, behind the scenes they cooperated closely with the US, providing military logistical assistance, as well as supporting illegal arrests and the kidnapping and torture of alleged terrorists.

The US and France are also closely cooperating against Syria—another target for Chirac's threats. Together both countries forced the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon.

In rattling his nuclear sword Chirac is also responding to powerful domestic pressures. Opinion poll ratings for the

73-year-old president have plummeted. Any attempt on his part to seek a third term of office in 2007, which is constitutionally possible, has been ruled out. By invoking the *force de frappe*, the traditional symbol of French power, Chirac is seeking to divert attention from increasing social tensions and appeal to French national pride.

At the same time he is trying to strengthen the position of close ally and French prime minister, Dominique de Villepin, against French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy. Both men are lining up to compete for Chirac's job as president. Sarkozy, who favours closer relations with the US, has made critical comments with regard to the *force de frappe*, which devours a tenth of the French defence budget—approximately €3 billion per year.

Chirac's initiative, however, is supported by a significant section of the French elite. Criticism has come mainly from the ranks of the Greens and the Communist Party, who accuse Chirac of sabotaging moves towards nuclear disarmament.

On the other hand, he has received full support from a prominent member of the Socialist Party. Laurent Fabius, who led a campaign against the European Union constitution last year and is a Socialist candidate for the office of president, expressed his agreement with Chirac's doctrine.

"There is nothing which I would fundamentally reject with regard to the nuclear position of France which he put forward," Fabius said. Chirac is right when he insists that terrorism represents a great danger, he said: "The determination of the head of state is based on the strength of its nuclear deterrent."



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