

White Paper on defense: the French bourgeoisie prepares for war

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On June 16, the French government released its White Paper on military policy, which outlines the country's strategic and procurement plans for the next 15 years. Despite necessarily diplomatic language, the document makes clear the intense concern with which France's ruling elite views the growing tensions in the global and French political situation, and its determination to prepare a military response.

The White Paper offers a sobering assessment of the likelihood of major wars breaking out in the near future. It argues: "In an uncertain and unstable international environment, French involvement in an inter-State war cannot be ruled out. The possibility of major conflict must therefore be taken into account when setting forth the force structure of the next 15 years."

Although the White Paper's authors do not explicitly mention the US war drive in the Middle East, the global scramble for oil and strategic advantage is clearly on their minds. They write: "Future tensions involving energy, food, and water, as well as strategic raw materials, can lead directly to major crises in one or several parts of the world. The same applies to the long-term effects of global warming, if preventive action is not taken in good time."

They add: "Many potential major regional contingencies have the potential to degenerate into a world-wide strategic upset." Given current US global military hegemony, this somewhat euphemistic phrase allows only one meaningful interpretation: the French ruling elite is concerned that the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan have weakened Washington to the point that its power will be challenged, and that the US will not be, in the long term, a reliable guarantor of the world political order and French imperialist interests.

The manpower and industrial base available to French capitalism, however, is too limited to sustain an independent global, high-technology military presence like that of the US. Given its drive to compete with American capitalism on world financial markets by decreasing the state's role in the economy, moreover, any substantial increase in military spending necessitates large-scale cuts in workers' living standards. Especially given the unpopularity of President Nicolas Sarkozy, such developments would risk provoking explosive responses from the French working class.

The White Paper therefore proposes to concentrate research and spending around the most important weapons programs and re-orient its military deployments around the most essential trade routes for French capitalism, while collaborating with NATO to increase its military influence. In an ominous development, largely uncommented upon, it also advocates preparing a military force for use inside France.

As in the US, the threat of terrorism is used to disguise the more

fundamental motivations for this realignment. Citing the threat of "jihadist-inspired terrorism," the report calls for "concentration on a priority geographical axis from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, the Arab-Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This axis corresponds to the areas where the risks related to the strategic interests of France and Europe are the highest. The White Paper also takes account of the growing importance of Asia for national security and favours both presence and cooperation in this direction from the Indian Ocean."

This corresponds to the main sea-lanes to France's old colonies in North Africa and the Middle East, France's principal external energy sources in the Persian Gulf and North Africa and the emerging industrial powers in Asia.

It also represents a shift away from Africa, which is currently the main focus of French military deployments. Controversially, the White Paper proposes to keep only "two bases in Africa, one on each of Africa's Atlantic and Indian Ocean seaboard," whereas today France maintains bases in Djibouti, Dakar, N'Djamena, Libreville, and Abidjan and contributes troops to several UN deployments in Africa. The White Paper promises an "enhanced" France's presence in the Persian Gulf, notably at its new base in Abu Dhabi.

Also ostensibly in response to terrorist threats, the White Paper proposes to form an "internal security policy," with the ability to deploy 10,000 troops inside France at all times, as well as expanding espionage, surveillance and cyber warfare programs.

With regards to equipment, the White Paper writes: "Individual European countries can no longer master every technology and capability at a national level. France must retain its [...] capability necessary for the maintenance of the strategic and political autonomy of the nation: nuclear deterrence, ballistic missiles, SSNs [nuclear submarines], and cyber-security." On the other hand, "France believes that the European framework must be privileged [for] combat aircraft, drones, cruise missiles, satellites, electronic components, etc., although procurement policy must include acquisitions on the world market."

It calls for "an operational ground force of 88,000 men, enabling a force-projection capability of 30,000 troops with 6 months' notice, 5,000 soldiers on permanent operational alert and the capability to mobilize 10,000 soldiers on the national territory to support civilian authorities in case of a major crisis." The navy is to maintain "an aircraft-carrier group [...] 18 frigates, six SSNs, and the capability to deploy one or two naval groups either for amphibious operations or for the protection of sea lanes." The Air Force and Navy collectively will maintain 300 combat aircraft, with an external force-projection capability of 70 aircraft.

The White Paper projects that France will spend some 377 billion

euros (excluding pensions) on defense between 2009 and 2020. It also announces some 54,000 jobs cuts in the defense ministry and armed forces over six or seven years, with resulting savings to be invested in upgrading military hardware.

The White Paper mentions several international institutions through which it hopes to increase French influence. It calls on the European Union (EU) to create a 60,000-man rapid-deployment force for intervention abroad, together with the necessary air and naval forces in support. It adds that “the authorization of the use of force by the [United Nations] Security Council is and must be the rule.”

It calls for “the full participation of France in the structures of NATO”—France quit NATO’s military command structure in 1966 under President Charles de Gaulle, who was concerned that US control of NATO did not allow France sufficient influence within that body.

However, it also “recalls three main principles in direct continuity with those defined by General de Gaulle: complete independence of our nuclear forces; French authorities must retain full freedom of assessment, which implies the absence of automatic military commitment and the maintenance of assets allowing for strategic autonomy [...] and lastly, permanent freedom of decision, which means that no French forces shall be permanently placed under NATO command in peace time.” In short, Paris is seeking to retain total freedom of action, despite its participation in NATO.

This declaration underscores the complex relationship between French and US imperialism. Sarkozy has carried out a tactical shift towards Washington, even as the US militarily dominates all the regions into which the White Paper seeks to extend French influence. The French bourgeoisie worries that its interests would be as threatened as those of the US in the event of a political cataclysm powerful enough to upset America’s dominant world position. It therefore inevitably finds itself subservient to Washington.

There is, however, a long history of tension between Paris and Washington, and French imperialism has rarely viewed the latter as a reliable custodian of its interests. De Gaulle gradually pulled French forces out of NATO’s military command from 1959 to 1966, at a time of bitter disputes over Washington’s insufficient support for France’s colonial repression of the Algerian independence struggle and French misgivings over the growing US involvement in Vietnam—a former French colony, from which France had been expelled after a humiliating defeat at Diem Bien Phu in 1954.

More recently, there have been Franco-American clashes over Africa, notably in 1994 in Rwanda, where France backed the established Hutu regime while the US supported the invading Rwandan Patriotic Front of Paul Kagame. However, the most significant episode was doubtless the widespread vilification of France by the US media and the Republican right in the aftermath of France’s opposition at the UN to the Bush administration’s proposal to use force against Iraq, in 2003.

It cannot have escaped the attention of the French elite’s leading strategists that the US media and political establishment proved themselves as capable of turning on an “ally” as on an isolated and devastated state like Iraq. It is therefore particularly striking that the substantial criticism of the White Paper by prominent French bourgeois political figures has almost exclusively gone in the direction of demanding greater independence from the US and NATO.

Particularly unusual was a public criticism by several anonymous French generals, writing under the name Surcouf—a privateer during the Napoleonic wars—in the June 19 edition of the conservative daily

Le Figaro. They argued for greater defense spending, noting: “Europe in general, and France in particular, are diminishing their defense effort at the very moment when everyone else’s defense budget is increasing (world-wide military spending has increased 45% in ten years).”

They continued: “We are returning to NATO, with a weakened military capacity, but at the same time we expect to enter into the command structure [...] Above all, we leave European military leadership to the British, even though we are aware of the particular nature of their relations with the United States. France will now operate in the same league as Italy.”

They particularly criticized the White Paper for giving up a perceived strategic advantage over the US in Africa, observing that “our network of bases gives us a capacity that is all the more unique, in that the African countries are refusing the deployment of the US’ Africom on African soil. [...] We are definitively weakening our position.”

The center-left daily *Le Monde* called for more military spending in its editorial on the White Paper, writing: “Just when everyone underlines the need to respond to new and multidimensional threats, when the great powers—the US, Russia, and China—are actively reinforcing their military potential, just when everyone observes, notably during external interventions, the obsolescence or limitations of French forces, the White Paper imposes substantial cuts (54,000 job cuts, putting off major investments). At the risk of invalidating several strategic ambitions.”

Several politicians criticized the White Paper’s plans for France’s reintegration into NATO. Jean-Michel Boucheron, a Socialist Party member of the National Assembly, called these plans “a major error which would dissolve our identity in a mythical unified West” and “would lead directly to a clash of civilizations and major conflicts.”

Ex-Prime Minister Alain Juppé, a political associate of conservative ex-President Jacques Chirac, gave an interview to news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in which he voiced concerns about France’s reintegration into NATO at a time when the European Union does not have a united defense policy. He said: “They told us, ‘OK, we will return to NATO if Europe reinforces its defense capabilities.’ [...] What worries me is that the ‘if’ has disappeared, and the White Paper is very clear: we are going back into NATO, even if at the same time the Irish no vote [on the EU’s Lisbon treaty] means that the opportunities for progress on defense matters seem weak.”



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