

French military White Paper plans escalating wars

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On April 29, France's Socialist Party (PS) government released its White Paper on military strategy. After his election a year ago, President François Hollande set up a commission to draft a new White Paper taking into account changes in world political situation since the publication of the previous French military White Paper in 2008.

In analysing the 2008 White Paper, the WSWs noted that the French ruling class was preparing to turn to war in an attempt to resolve the contradictions besetting world imperialism. This analysis has been confirmed in the ensuing five years, which have seen an explosion of French imperialist aggression after the outbreak of the 2008 economic crisis and of revolutionary working class struggles in Egypt in 2011. In two years, France has waged wars in Libya, the Ivory Coast, and now in Mali and Syria.

The current White Paper lays out plans not only to continue but to massively escalate French military aggression overseas. It notes, "The evolution of the strategic context could lead our country not only to take the initiative of operations, but to take on, more often than in the past, a substantial portion of the responsibilities involved in the conduct of military action."

The White Paper assembles a stunningly vast list of targets or potential targets for French military aggression. It discusses the possibility of further wars in Africa, deployments in the Middle East and Asia for possible conflicts with Iran and China, and more extensive deployments of French nuclear forces.

The PS government's adoption of the White Paper and the reaction to it in the media are symptoms of a ruling class that has completely lost its head. French media reports have criticised the White Paper not for outlining a megalomaniacal militarist agenda, but for

not arming France heavily enough to prosecute these conflicts effectively.

The White Paper plans to freeze defence spending at €31.4 billion annually. This would force 24,000 military job cuts between 2014 and 2019, and a cut in the number of troops that can be deployed overseas from the current nominal 30,000 to 15,000.

Several military analysts downplayed the proposed cuts, however, insisting that they would be repealed and other spending cut as needed in order to pay for war. Jean-Dominique Merchet said, "All the fundamentals will be maintained.... Do not forget that if the geopolitical context changes radically over the next three or four years, we will act differently. We would sacrifice other things to be able to intervene more massively."

In fact, the conflicts envisaged in the White Paper could only be funded through devastating attacks on working class living standards, under conditions in which the European economy is already disintegrating under the impact of savage austerity measures. Conditions are being created for deep and politically explosive opposition, centred in the working class, to policies of war and austerity unanimously supported in the political establishment.

The White Paper lists the Mediterranean, North Africa, the Sahel, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean as arenas for French intervention. France plans to maintain four bases in Africa. The White Paper also notes the critical character of the South China Sea—where the United States has stoked naval stand-offs between China and other regional countries—and broader French interests in East Asia.

Christophe Guilloteau, a conservative deputy who helped draft the White Paper, said that France's war in Mali ensured that Africa would remain a defence

priority for France. On Radio-France International, he said that since the Mali war, “some people who thought that we should disengage from Africa have realised that this was not a good idea. If we had not had pre-positioned forces in Chad, and above all in Ivory Coast with Operation Unicorn, we could not have responded to the call from Mali so quickly.”

Paul Melly, an Associate Africa Programme fellow at London-based think tank Chatham House, explained: “If this model [for the intervention in Mali] works, it is one that could be extended more widely. So Mali is something of a test bed.”

The White Paper confirms the French alignment on Washington associated with Hollande’s conservative predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. Under Sarkozy, France re-integrated itself into the NATO military structure in 2009, before discussing a possible military alliance with Britain, a close US ally, in 2010, and fighting a wave of US-led wars starting in 2011.

The White Paper backs the US war drive against Iran, charging without proof that Iran is developing nuclear weapons: “The Persian Gulf takes on particular strategic importance, [because] Iran’s race to develop nuclear military capacities creates a risk of proliferation.”

The White Paper calls for France to increase its influence in the region, working with the United States and its regional proxies. It notes that “France has reinforced its presence and its defence cooperation” with the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar—including building a military base in Abu Dhabi, the UAE’s capital.

In Asia, the White Paper praises the US “pivot to Asia” that aims to contain China and has escalated military tensions between Washington and Beijing. Like Washington, Paris views China’s rising influence as a threat to its geo-strategic interests, particularly in Africa.

It says, “the equilibrium in East Asia has been profoundly modified by the rising power of China.... Reinforcing America’s military presence in the region can contribute to controlling tensions in Asia.”

In fact, the “pivot to Asia” has immensely escalated tensions in Asia, driving a major war scare over North Korea last month. The White Paper makes clear that France would seek to join in a major regional conflict, pledging that France “would bring, in case of open

crisis, a political and military contribution of an appropriate level.”

The paper recommends maintaining France’s nuclear weapons, such as the SN3G submarine and M51 missile programmes, which cost nearly €3.5 billion (US\$4.6 billion) per year. While the White Paper asserts that France’s nuclear weapons programme is “strictly defensive,” it adds, “Some of the assets of the nuclear forces can be used for conventional operations with the approval of the President of the Republic.”

The breaking down of barriers between nuclear and conventional forces is a further step towards using nuclear weapons—a threat that has already been raised by French officials. In 2006, then-president Jacques Chirac announced that France might launch nuclear strikes against terrorists, threats to France’s “strategic supplies,” or threats against its allies (see “French president Chirac threatens nuclear retaliation in the event of terrorist attacks”).

Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the petty-bourgeois Left Front, denounced the cuts in defence spending outlined in the White Paper. He denounced “austerity” and the US alliance as “two mortal dangers for France’s independence and sovereignty”—making a reactionary anti-American appeal, even though he has enthusiastically supported every war fought by Paris in collaboration with Washington, from Libya to the current wars in Mali and Syria.

Melenchon’s pro-war comments reflect the gulf separating the bourgeoisie and the affluent pseudo-left layers represented in the Left Front from the working class. Terrified of the struggles brewing between the working class and the reactionary social and military agenda of Hollande, they demand that ever-more resources be plunged into the war machine.



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