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Abstract and Keywords
This chapter provides readers with an overview of the transformations of French defence policy since 1991. To a large degree, French defence policy is still perceived through a ‘Gaullist’ prism by non-specialist observers, who tend to analyse French defence developments by referring to a pursuit of ‘independence’ at all costs, or a willingness to maintain neo-colonialists’ privileges. This chapter challenges this prevailing narrative by providing a concise yet complete analysis of the drivers of French defence policy. First, it discusses the French strategic culture, the institutional setting (role of the president, parliament, etc.) and civil–military relations in France. Second, it presents the role of nuclear weapons in French defence policy. Finally, it presents the evolution of the force structure since 1991. It also discusses the two key drivers of military change in France: interventions abroad and France’s membership to international security institutions.

Keywords: France, military change, NATO, Gaullism, defence policy, civil–military relations

Introduction
NATIONAL defence was written into the DNA of the French Fifth Republic, which came into being in 1958. At the time, France was fighting a war in Algeria, then a national territory, and was at risk of experiencing a military putsch on account of the civilian desire to pull back and redefine the defence needs of the nation. Moreover, France’s emerging nuclear capability underpinned its claim to international influence. As France extracted itself from Algeria in 1962, the nuclear force became increasingly important, not only for French foreign policy but also for the integration of hitherto hostile domestic political forces into a republican consensus on the virtue of strategic autonomy and relevance.¹

Political forces in the Fifth Republic had differing political views on the purpose of strategic autonomy—for instance, on the issues of international alignment in either the European Union (EU) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), cooperation with cold war neutrals in support of a ‘third option’, the need to carve out a French area of influence in Africa, or running a programme simply of full national flexibility, but to all political camps there could be no questioning the relevance of being a capable and therefore relevant military actor. The Fifth Republic has thus bestowed on France a remarkable legacy of military capability and strategic outlook. France does not draw back from the challenge of defining bold ambitions that require significant defence investments and sometimes war efforts.

The first section of this chapter examines the strategic and institutional legacies hereof and how France since the cold war has sought to upgrade its political and defence doctrines for a changing world. As we shall see, France remains an active military player but is also struggling in some respects to modernize its outlook and long-term doctrine for change. In the second section we zoom in on nuclear doctrine, which remains central to France and perhaps increasingly so from the point of view of doctrine. Finally, we examine force (p.36) transformation among conventional forces, outlining key developments for the army, navy, and air force. Defence transformation in France was shaped by several factors, including (mis-)adaptation to a changing international system, status-seeking, alliance and budgetary constraints, and a changing security environment. The chapter concludes that, while conventional force capabilities are in decline numerically, they are modernizing and significant, and in effect define France as one of the key second-rank powers of the international arena. However, the chapter also finds that France’s expeditionary prowess is not fully matched by politico-strategic clarity in regards to its national and autonomous ambitions vis-à-vis collective ambitions as articulated by the EU and NATO. Financial challenges in generating cutting-edge military power only accentuate the need for clear political priorities. The bottom line is thus that France has an advantageous and competitive military position, but needs to clarify the political and financial framework for force modernization.
Defence Policymaking in a French Context
This section analyses the context in which French defence policy is formulated. It explores the general foreign and security policy orientation and the impact of Gaullism, before discussing the strong role of the executive (including when it comes to formulating defence doctrines) and the French strategic culture regarding the use of force. It shows that the Gaullist legacy (or a romanticized understanding of it) still influences French defence policy, and the importance of status-seeking motivations in the use of armed forces.

Still Gaullist after All?
France was quite comfortable with the bipolar world, as the opposition between the United States and the USSR meant that there was room for an ambitious actor to try to navigate beyond the bipolarization of the international system. It also meant that France could develop genuinely autonomous ways to act abroad, in particular through military interventions in former colonies and the acquisition of nuclear capabilities. This allowed France to keep behaving as a great power, by adopting practices (in particular nuclear practices) similar to those of the major powers, thus mitigating the objective loss of geopolitical importance that France suffered after the Second World War. Yet, this situation changed with the end of the cold war and the emergence of the unipolar world: French foreign policy had to adjust.

The transformation of the international system that followed the end of the cold war put French foreign and defence policy under pressure. The Gaullist foreign policy had been based on the willingness to find some type of ‘third way’ between the two blocs. With the rise of unipolarity, this fundamental premise disappeared. Therefore, a progressive gap was created between France’s foreign-policy objectives, which had to be redefined, and the rhetoric and practice of independence, which was still implemented by French decision-makers out of habit and experience. Unsurprisingly, French policymakers were uncomfortable with the new international order, complaining of the ‘hyperpower’ of the United States, and calling on multiple occasions for the emergence of a ‘multipolar world’. In other words, French decision-makers simply updated the rhetorical means to achieve France’s cold war foreign-policy objective (adding ‘multipolarity’ to the traditional call for independence), which prevented the emergence of deep thinking about the transformation of the international system and the consequences for French foreign policy.
Yet, much had to be done. The unipolar world order meant that, in one way or another, France had to reinvent its relationship with the United States, as it could not manoeuvre between two blocs of equivalent power any longer. It also meant that France’s relationship with NATO had to be reconsidered, taking into account the alliance’s new roles after the cold war. Characteristically, important parts of the French strategic community pushed for the dissolution of NATO after 1991 and immediately saw the United States as a new ‘empire’ that had to be tamed. As such, authors reactivated the old Gaullist distinction between the Atlantic Alliance (which could be maintained) and NATO as an organization (which could disappear in order to leave room for a European defence). For more than a decade, French policymakers hoped for the establishment of a ‘European defence’ that would, depending on the moment, be a European pillar within NATO or a fully autonomous capacity that would make NATO obsolete. It was only after the 2010s that France, observing the European countries’ reluctance to the project, acknowledged that ‘European Defence’ as initially conceived was more an ideal than an achievable goal, and that smaller steps had to be envisioned instead. Also, with multinational interventions becoming the new trend for Western states through a combination of normative pressures towards multilateralism and budgetary constraints, the French armed forces had to learn how to cooperate with their partners, which highlighted the differences in strategic cultures, the possibility of reform, but also the potential for convergence with the armed forces of like-minded countries. Yet, despite the amplitude of the transformation of the international system, the seduction of ‘autonomy’ as an objective per se means that any change in French security and defence policy is judged according to the threshold of a romanticized Gaullism, which serves as a rhetorical resource to shame policies actors disagree with. This exercise is evenly spread on all sides of the political spectrum, thus validating André Malraux’s ironic formulation when he forecast that De Gaulle’s legacy would be disputed by all political groups: ‘everyone has been, is, or will be a Gaullist’. The constant reference to the French cold war foreign and defence policy, and subsequent shaming of any departure from it, is easily explainable by the absence of a new transpartisan grand narrative relevant for the contemporary international system, but overlooks the actual security policy changes France went through since the end of the cold war, which made her a ‘reluctant atlanticist’. The romanticization of the French ‘Gaullist’ policy is partly related to the powers granted to the French president in the defence and security domains, thus facilitating the association between the individual and the policies themselves.

The Institutional Context
Since the inception of the Fifth Republic in 1958, France has been considered as the ideal type of a strong state in defence and foreign affairs, with a powerful executive and weak parliamentary control. The key player is the French President, with a high level of executive flexibility within the ‘reserved domain’ (domaine réservé)—the defence, security, and foreign policies in which the dominance of the President has no equivalent in other democracies. Although it has no legal basis—the notion does not appear in any official text—the ‘reserved domain’ is the most decisive institution for the formulation of military policy. It is a regulatory mechanism for relations both within the executive, and between the executive and the legislative. The ‘reserved domain’ is also a regulatory mechanism for relations between political power and the army, defined by strict political control over the armed forces with an uncontested subordination of the military to the President. The Prime Minister is the second key player under Article 20, which states that ‘the government shall determine and conduct the policy of the Nation’, and affirms in the second paragraph that the government may ‘have at its disposal the armed forces’. Under Article 21, ‘the Prime Minister shall direct the operation of the Government. He shall be responsible for national defence’. The Prime Minister, the Defence Minister, and the Foreign Affairs Minister are especially strong and influential during periods of political cohabitation (when the government originates from a parliamentary majority opposed to the President). But a study of the periods of cohabitation (1986–8, 1993–5, 1997–2002) reveals that, if the decision-making process is more balanced and the flexibility of the President is diminished, the presidential supremacy on defence and foreign issues remains the main feature of policymaking. There are no constitutional provisions restricting the power of the executive concerning the deployment of armed forces. The main legal provisions regulating the use of armed force were the legal limitations on the deployment of conscripts outside Europe, unless they sign a specific contract volunteering for military operations. This limitation was one of the many arguments in favour of the shift to all-volunteer armed forces in 1996.
The decision-making process in France is highly centralized—in the hands of the executive power. The decisions for the deployment of armed forces are taken by the National Defence and Security Council, headed by the President of the Republic. The Prime Minister, the Defence Minister, and the Foreign Affairs Minister are members of this council and are closely involved. The decisions are implemented by the Prime Minister and the government under the close scrutiny of the President and his Staff. The Joint Chief of Staff is the key military figure. An important decree in 2005 asserted the Joint Chief of Staff (Chef d’état-major des armées) as the true chief of the armed forces, formalizing a long process of increasing inter-military cooperation, which was initiated after the First Gulf War (1991). The Joint Chief of Staff is the military advisor of the government and the President. He is ‘responsible for the preparation and the use of armed forces’. The French President has at his disposal a personal chief of staff (Chef d’état-major particulier), who is the day-to-day advisor and interlocutor of the President for military operations—a very powerful and influential position in the French system.

As shown by comparative studies of the parliamentary control of armed forces in Europe, the French system of parliamentary control is ‘the weakest’ compared with other European countries, with ‘close to zero’ influence on defence issues. This weakness is particularly obvious concerning the deployment of the armed forces. The new version of Article 35 of the Constitution, revised in 2008, specifies that the government must inform the parliament of any foreign intervention within three days. If the deployment of armed forces exceeds four months, the government should require the authorization of the parliament to prolong the military operation (Article 35.3 of the Constitution). But this does not mean a real improvement for parliamentary control, since to a large extent parliamentarians are ‘trapped’ by the actual deployment of soldiers on the ground. The second method of parliamentary control resides in a posteriori control of external operations. The period of cohabitation between 1997 and 2002 was deemed auspicious in this way, with information-gathering missions in Rwanda and Srebrenica. Whatever the limitations inherent to these two missions, they demonstrate unprecedented parliamentary intrusion at the heart of the reserved domain of the executive, but do not seem to have triggered a larger movement as of 2017. This explains why the formulation of new White Books on defence policy, to which this chapter now turns, is always decided by the executive.

Five-year framework development programmes (lois de programmation militaire) prepared by the government and adopted by the parliament define the framework for military reform in France. These framework programmes sketch main trends in the security environment, define investment priorities, and guide the annual work of both government and parliament in regards to defence appropriations. While this planning approach has the advantage of combining a long-term outlook with short-term adaptation, occasional dramatic changes in the security environment necessitate a broader assessment of the country’s overarching defence doctrine, which takes the form of government White Books.20

In 1994 the government published a White Book on defence to take stock of the end of the cold war. It was in fact only the second White Book of the Fifth Republic, with the first published in 1972 to cement France’s Gaullist approach to the cold war. The 1994 White Book sought to adjust the defence toolbox, scaling back the predominance of nuclear deterrence and upgrading the role of conventional forces and force projection. Still, the emphasis was on distinct geographical circles of defence priorities (France, Europe, the world). While force projection was upgraded in terms of capacity, it thus remained constrained by geography and the assumption that threats to France and Europe could be managed by diplomacy and limited interventions along the rims of Europe.21

For as long as Balkan crisis management defined the main out-of-area challenge for France and its allies, this was not an unreasonable approach. The gradual appearance of more globalized, less territorial, and more asymmetrical threats, along with the relative decline of Western wealth compared to that of Asia, eventually undercut the approach, however. A new White Book in 2008 took stock. Its key contributions were to connect hitherto separate domains: domestic and international security, and security and defence.22 It introduced the concept of societal resilience into the French planning framework, established a national council of integrated security and defence, and generally emphasized how intelligence and awareness had to gain in precedence.
A mere five years later, in 2013, a new White Book appeared that aimed to steer the coming three development programmes and to define its horizon as 2028. The new White Book moved in the same direction as its predecessor but underscored that new conditions—the financial crisis of 2008, the security transition in Europe as the United States aimed to pivot to Asia, enduring and engulfing crises of governance and insurrection, sometimes leading to international terrorism, in the Middle East and North Africa—all necessitated a fresh look at the main strategic tasks of French security and defence forces. In particular, it called for a fuller integration of ‘prevention, deterrence, and intervention’. It also outlined a decreased ambition for force projection and an enhanced ambition to Europeanize the defence industry, which remains significant in France. Not coincidentally, the new White Book coincided with an EU effort (in December 2013) to revitalize its defence dimension, including ‘a more integrated, sustainable, innovative and competitive defence technological and industrial base’.

The White Book foresaw a cut to the defence budget, from 1.6 per cent to 1.3 per cent of GDP, and therefore a lowering of the force projection ambition. Previously, France had aimed to maintain a rapid reaction force of 2,300 personnel able to intervene in 72 hours at a distance of 5,000 km, but also to be capable of contributing 30,000 personnel to a major combat operation. The White Book lowered the sight to a reaction time of 7 days and a distance of 3,000 km for the quick reaction forces and a total size of 15,000 personnel for the major combat force.

Reality has since caught up with this reduced ambition, as a state of emergency at home provoked by terrorist attacks in 2015 and an ongoing high tempo of external operations have provoked a revised look at the level of ambition. Thus, in the spring of 2016, President François Hollande announced increases in defence spending, which in effect reversed significant parts of the cuts planned in 2013–14, bringing the French defence effort to nearly 1.8 per cent of GDP. In early 2017, he went a step further and declared an ambition to reach the 2 per cent threshold that has become the gold standard in NATO and that will be critical for the French effort to gain influence with a Trump administration focused on burden-sharing. François Hollande’s successor, Emmanuel Macron, has confirmed this ambition to reach the 2 per cent threshold by 2025.
White Books have become more frequent in France, in particular with the decision to publish one in 2013, a mere five years after its predecessor. It is possible that President Macron might publish yet another White Book, in around 2018, in which case they will have become a hallmark of changing presidencies rather than a changing strategic environment. It would imply a break from the tradition of White Books being a type of national or bipartisan effort to define a strategic horizon and then work towards it. Certainly, bipartisanship is always difficult and contested at the margins, but the 1972 and 1994 White Books nevertheless had this bipartisan character. The 2008 and 2013 White Books were more overtly linked to the personality and principles of the sitting president. If this trend continues, France will experience greater fluctuation in its grand strategic debates. White Books would thus offer themselves as windows to changing political ideas and less as windows to long-term defence reform plans and reforms.

The Use of Armed Forces
France considers its armed forces a primary tool to achieve security objectives, more than commerce or international aid for example. While an entire chapter in this handbook (Chapter 46) is devoted to analysing French military interventions, this section lays out the (p.42) factors shaping the perception of the use of armed forces abroad. It illustrates the degree to which military intervention is perceived by French elites as a status-seeking tool, but also highlights the contradictions in the French strategic culture in that regard. Anthony Forster classifies the country as one of the two ‘expeditionary warfare’ models of armed forces in Europe, alongside the United Kingdom.\(^{26}\) France is clearly one of the European countries most likely to emphasize the recourse to military intervention and to give priority to military force rather than to non-military tools in crisis management. However, there is a discrepancy with public opinion, which strongly believes that economic power is more important in world politics than military power (85 per cent). Furthermore, French public opinion is more supportive of economic incentives (32 per cent) or economic sanctions (20 per cent) than of military action (8 per cent) to address Iran’s acquiring nuclear weapons.\(^{27}\) French foreign-policy attitudes concerning situations such as those in the Middle East and North Africa (‘the Arab Spring’) reveal the same pattern: 69 per cent support providing aid for economic development, which is rather more than those who support sending military forces (54 per cent). But this discrepancy does not reveal a strong disconnection between the public and the political elite concerning the use of force: more than half of French people (54 per cent) indeed support sending military forces to help remove non-democratic governments. At the beginning of the intervention in Libya (2011), 58 per cent supported the military operation, 56 per cent supported sending ground troops to assist the rebels, and 60 per cent supported military action against Iran if it was the only option left. What is noticeable is that French public opinion is systematically the most supportive of military options among the European public opinions, revealing a strong militarism as a base of foreign-policy attitudes.
The French strategic and security culture is heir to two distinct traditions. The first tradition directly relates to France’s missionary self-understanding: being the ‘country of human rights’, France has to defend and promote these rights worldwide. This rhetoric is widespread in the political discourse and constitutes one of the cornerstones of France’s diplomatic ambitions. The second tradition is the Gaullist legacy of independence, an objective never questioned by the ruling parties, as the French security culture is based on the ‘sacrosanct principle of autonomous decision-making and independent defence capabilities’. In fact, as Meunier observes, France’s goals to pursue both independence and multilateralism are conflicting and can lead to contradictions between the official rhetoric and the actual practice.

A defining characteristic of France’s security culture is its enduring willingness to be a major partner in multinational operations. As Irondelle and Besancenot state: ‘The objective of French policy makers in planning future expenditure and military capabilities is to maximize France’s political and military rank within international military coalitions, rather than to maximize operational military power on the ground’.

This ambition is first shown by the emphasis on the capacity for French Operational Headquarters to plan and conduct major multinational operations: France’s major land, naval, and air headquarters received NATO’s ‘High Readiness Forces’ label and are able to command and control forces at the brigade level and above. These command and control (C2) capabilities are also useful for EU-led operations. France allocates resources to ‘high-profile’ capabilities such as intelligence (including spatial capabilities) or special forces. The emphasis on such capabilities reflects France’s willingness both to be a major contributor to any multinational operation (hence punching above its weight in terms of diplomatic status) and to have the independence to conduct operations on a purely national basis, if needed. Generally speaking, France intends to be an important diplomatic actor and to participate in every key strategic ‘club’ (NATO, G20, NPT, and so on), especially if they formalize a hierarchy between states (such as the Security Council). These forums allow France to reconcile its multilateralist claims while defending its national interests. When it comes to the use of military force, France emphasizes the need for a UN resolution and mandate, but acknowledges that French armed forces might have to intervene on a unilateral basis to protect its citizens abroad or to enforce bilateral security agreements with former colonies in Africa. However, unilateral operations have to be limited in scope because of the limited capabilities of the French armed forces.
This aspect, once again, reveals the contradictions within the French strategic culture. The official political discourse (as exemplified by Dominique de Villepin’s speech to the United Nations to oppose the US intervention in Iraq), as well as official strategic doctrine (by relegating intervention to the fifth and last position of the list of the armed forces’ strategic functions), calls for the use of force as an instrument of last resort. However, practice proves otherwise, and the years between 1991 and 2011 have witnessed a number of French military interventions in which the armed forces were perceived as a tool to increase French diplomatic status. It remains to be seen whether mutually reinforcing factors such as the evolution of the strategic context (with the West probably reluctant to wage long stabilization campaigns like that in Afghanistan), regular claims to more ‘selectivity’ in the engagements, and shrinking armed forces might compel France actually to reduce its military commitments. The distribution of expenditure across military services is subject to strong inertia effects in France, and has been amazingly stable since 1988. From 1988 to 2013, the share of each branch (gendarmerie, air force, army, navy) in the defence budget remained almost the same. The navy consistently received about 25 per cent of the capital expenditure, the army and the air force receiving respectively about 21 and 24 per cent. The most significant change has been the gradual decrease of investment in the nuclear field. The nuclear share of the defence equipment budget has been reduced from 40 to 21 per cent as of 2017, while the nuclear share of the overall defence budget dropped from 16.9 to 8.75 per cent between 1990 and 1999. This reduction can be interpreted as a shift in emphasis to transform the French army into a more projectable force by developing its own version of modern warfare concepts such as network-centric warfare or effects-based operations.33

Hence, France has a long-established tradition of military interventionism in order to secure political objectives that clashes with its official claims to consider military force as an instrument of last resort. It is normal for French policymakers to contemplate the use of armed force, an option that they favour over alternatives such as commerce or international aid. However, it is possible that gradually shrinking military capabilities will increasingly force France to consider modes of action other than military force, a situation that is likely to be interpreted as an admission of weakness in policymaking circles. This is related to the fact that military interventions are seen as an important aspect of the ‘great power status’ to which France aspires, as is the possession of nuclear weapons.

The Evolution of the Nuclear Doctrine
Since the end of the cold war, the French nuclear doctrine has gradually converged with those of its key Western nuclear allies (the United Kingdom and the United States), in particular regarding the political role of nuclear weapons, deterrence by punishment, and the reduced role of nuclear weapons in the current security environment. France’s nuclear strategy during the cold war differed in many ways from its American and British counterparts. Important divergences on the very principles that determined the role and use of nuclear weapons led to strong differences between France and its two Western counterparts. A first difference between London and Paris stemmed from an orthodox view in Paris of the need for an absolutely independent national deterrent, which guided both the development of the nuclear arsenal and the framework in which it could be used. Secondly, while France’s ‘dissuasion du faible au fort’ (‘deterrence of the strong by the weak’) represented a strategy based solely on absolute deterrence and deterrence by punishment, the United States and NATO integrated concepts of limited deterrence and deterrence by denial into their nuclear strategies.

Since the end of the cold war, several evolutions have contributed to a de facto convergence of key features of independently developed US and French policies in the post-cold-war era. First of all, the three Western nuclear powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) now share a common view about the fundamentally political role of nuclear weapons, which are supposed to be an instrument of deterrence rather than a war-fighting tool, as expressed in NATO’s 1999 Strategic Concept and in the 2012 Deterrence and Defence Posture Review. This represents a US–UK move towards a long-held French position and therefore constitutes a first area of convergence.

A second area of convergence stems from French post-cold war efforts to adapt its absolute deterrence concept to the new security environment, in particular against threats emanating from regional actors potentially armed with weapons of mass destruction. While France’s nuclear strategy remains based on a deterrence by punishment logic, the way such a punishment would be effected has evolved with the introduction of a certain flexibility in the use of nuclear weapons. As in the US and UK cases, massive strikes against an adversary’s population centres have been gradually removed from French publicly stated response options to be replaced by more controlled, limited, and accurate strikes against political, military, and economic centres of power. To do so, French submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) are now fitted with variable numbers of warheads and can be launched individually (in contrast with the full launch of a cold war massive nuclear strike).
A further evolution that relates to the new security environment is the gradual acceptance of ballistic missile defences by French doctrine. Already hinted at in the 1994 Defence White Paper, theatre missile defence has been rapidly accepted by French strategists and official documents in the 1990s as a necessary protection against limited missile strikes against deployed forces.  

37 In more general terms, Presidents Chirac and Sarkozy respectively defined ballistic missile defence (BMD) as ‘a complement to deterrence that diminishes our vulnerabilities’ and as a ‘useful complement to deterrence’ that allows France to ‘preserve its freedom of action’.  

38 As a result, France participates in NATO’s work geared to protecting all the alliance’s territory from a limited ballistic missile strike. Combined with a broader set of nuclear employment options, the acceptance of BMD might also show a certain willingness better to control escalation, which would be yet another point of convergence with France’s two Western nuclear counterparts.

A last trend commonly experienced by all three Western nuclear powers is linked to the relative centrality of nuclear deterrence in these countries’ defence strategy.  

39 Indeed, as outlined in NATO’s Defence and Deterrence Posture Review, there is a shared understanding in Washington, London, and Paris about the absence of a current and significant threat to their vital interests. As such, nuclear use has become a remote prospect, which contrasts with the high level of engagement of conventional forces in foreign operations to defend non-vital interests. This has led to a rebalancing of the relationship between conventional and nuclear forces in favour of the former, in particular in French strategy. While the main role of conventional forces during the cold war was to contribute to the general deterrence manoeuvre, it is now nuclear forces that serve as an umbrella for expeditionary conventional operations.  

40 This relative centrality of nuclear deterrence in the overall defence policy has therefore been a significant point of convergence between Paris, London, and Washington since the end of the cold war. Just like the nuclear doctrine, the French armed forces have also evolved since the end of the cold war.

The Transformation of the French Armed Forces since 1991
The 1990s were a phase during which French decision-makers contemplated two great ‘drivers’ of transformation most visibly put on display in the First Gulf War of (p.46) 1991—namely strategic upheaval (that is, US supremacy after the cold war) and leaps in technological capacity (that is, information technology). Alliance commitments and credibility—some would say ‘rank’—should be mentioned as a ‘driver’ in their own right because accelerated US investments in ‘military transformation’ in the early 2000s provoked France’s leap into the future. Before then, France had professionalized its forces but not changed the underlying organization, technologies, and doctrine. Military transformation in the early 2000s threatened a loss of influence, and France thus reacted. With this decision, it then had to navigate the usual ‘shapers’ of military change: the culture of military services, the cost of new platforms and technology, bureaucratic interests, and the quality of political–military leadership.

The Army

The French army was at the centre of the debates on professionalization through the 1990s, because the army represented the ‘nation in arms’ that had become both a legacy of the 1789 revolution and a bulwark against the insurrectionism that characterized parts of the professional army in the early 1960s. Committed to these legacies, President Mitterrand (1981–95) did not budge, even though the 1991 Gulf War had underscored the superiority of deployable professional forces. Concerned that France could not pull its weight in the Atlantic Alliance and not back claims of enhanced ‘European’ influence, President Chirac in 1996–7 opted for full professionalization. Some years later, when the United States drove the new wave of ‘transformation’, the French army was again put to the test: it had to integrate into a ‘joint’ information-technology architecture and simultaneously define its own distinct service footprint in the shape of an expeditionary war-fighting capacity.

The decade of ‘transformation’ that followed put brigades front and centre of the army because they were versatile (compared to divisions) and had real punch (compared to battalions). Moreover, among the brigades, the onus fell on the ‘medium’ heavy brigades equipped with armoured vehicles that had greater speed compared to heavy brigades with main battle tanks and greater firepower and protection compared to infantry brigades. In this, the French army matched that of the United States, whose land-force transformation effort likewise focused on integrating information technology, networked vehicles, and stand-off firepower in expeditionary brigade structures that in the United States were labelled Stryker and in France Scorpion.
At the height of the transformation wave, the French army had eight regular brigades and then three special brigades, and Scorpion defined a horizon of development. Since then, battle experience and battle lab testing and development in cooperation with the armament industry have made a reality of Scorpion. In mid-2016, the army consolidated its brigades into a division structure and a slimmed-down command structure, in part to take the greatest possible advantage of Scorpion technologies, but also in part to respond to a punishing tempo of expeditionary operations and to strengthen the army’s contribution to homeland security. As of 2017, the main land forces are thus organized into two Scorpion divisions of three brigades each: the 1st division headquartered in Besançon and the 3rd division headquartered in Marseille. In addition, the army has opened a new homeland security command headquartered in Paris, which has 10,000 troops assigned to it in addition to army reserves. The latter took form as a consequence of professionalization and is thus relatively new, and the aim is to build the reserve force up to a level of 40,000.

The future army’s range of main equipment, from Leclerc battle tanks over Griffon and Jaguar armoured vehicles to new drones, will thus be connected to improved infantry gear and communication systems, generating an integrated ‘Scorpion’ land force. It is a slimmer force compared to 2010, for instance, when its combat size was 110,000 personnel; its level of ambition in 2017 is 77,000. However, this is an improvement compared to 2013–14 plans, which would have cut the army to 66,000. The game changer, the cause of an increase in force size, was the terrorist attacks on French soil in 2015 and the ensuing deployment of 10,000 army personnel for the purpose of homeland security, which severely stretched the army.

Besides contributing to homeland security at the level of 10,000 troops, the army’s operational level of ambition remains the one of the 2013 White Book to maintain a national emergency force of 4,000 of a total of 5,000 troops, which includes an immediate reaction force of 2,300, of which the army will deliver 1,500. In addition, the army must have a capacity to deploy and sustain 6,000–7,000 troops for each of three simultaneous crisis management operations, or, the capacity to pull together a force of 15,000 troops to a major combat operation in coalition (or NATO) format. The army has in recent years consistently had a high tempo of deployments; this includes not only the extensive presence in homeland protection, but in 2015 also participation in no less than eight combat theatres—‘more than any time in recent [French] history’. Counting the forces dedicated to homeland protection and crisis-management operations, by 2018 the army will have up to 30,000 forces engaged at any one point in time.
The sum total is an impressive land force that remains coherent and operational and, in addition, is modernizing. It is stretched, though, even as it pulls in reserves. Force modernization (Scorpion) will continue to be costly, as will operations. However, the French land capacity for and experience in operations along the periphery of Europe will continue to be significant and will bolster French foreign policy in an era of declining US engagement.

The Navy
Like the other services, the French navy has been reduced since 1991. However, it is still a 'blue-water' navy capable of worldwide intervention, despite a diminishing trend in capabilities and the necessity to operate within a multinational framework in the case of high-intensity coercion operations. The reduction of the navy’s format has been homothetic, without questioning (so far) the organizational model and strategic conceptions around which the French navy was built.

Historically, France has a complicated relationship with its navy and has struggled to maintain a balance between being both a naval and a land power, a geopolitical incentive derived from France’s particular geographic position of being open to the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, and the English Channel while simultaneously bordering the land mass of Germany. Yet, because of its overseas possessions in Guyana, New Caledonia, and the Indian Ocean, France maintains naval forces that contribute to the affirmation of French sovereignty. Unlike the United States, France does not have a coastguard capability. Therefore, the navy (alongside other services such as customs and gendarmerie) contributes to the protection of the French naval domain from risks such as pollution, accidents, trafficking, and smuggling. This mission covers 20 per cent of the navy’s activities.

The navy is organized around four main commands: naval action force (Force d’Action Navale, FAN), submarine forces (Forces sous-marines, FSM), naval aviation (aéronautique navale, ALAVIA) and the commando and marines force (force maritime des fusiliers marins et commandos, FORFUSCO). The main capability at the disposal of the French navy is the carrier strike group, organized around the aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle and comprising (beyond the aircraft carrier itself) one attack submarine, four destroyers (two specialized in air defence, two specialized in submarine defence), and one frigate acting as a scout. The French navy can also mount an amphibious group organized around one of the three Landing Helicopter Dock ships of the Mistral class. The navy contributes to the French deterrence mission in two ways. First, ALAVIA has developed a squadron of 43 Rafale and 9 Super-Étendard jets, which can be equipped with the ASMP-A nuclear missile. But mostly, the French navy operates four ballistic missile submarines, which constitute the heart of the French nuclear deterrence capability.
With a total of about 300 ships (10 submarines, 90 combat ships, and 200 support ships), the French navy can be considered a ‘second-rank’ navy with worldwide capabilities. Yet, the gradual decrease in the number of combat ships because of budget pressures (notably a reduction in the number of new destroyers being available to the navy) raises questions regarding the resilience of the navy in the event of high-intensity coercive operations: in such a situation, the French navy would be comparable to a powerful rifle with only one bullet.

The Air Force

Since the end of the cold war, the French Air Force (FAF) has had to reconcile the need for technological upgrade with a reduction in its overall format. The FAF began the new cold-war era with a shock. The Gulf War demonstrated the limits of its capabilities and its (p.49) doctrine. As Anrig explains: ‘Desert Storm proved too big, too technologically advanced and too Anglo-Saxon for the FAF’. The tactical skills of the French pilots are unquestioned and were appreciated by their partners in the coalition. Nevertheless, the contribution was limited by material problems. The FAF lacked compatible Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) equipment and was poorly equipped in night-vision capabilities. This realization led to an active policy of upgrading the French Air Force capabilities, notably through the acquisition of precision-guided munitions and of capabilities necessary to operate within a multinational framework. Yet, this has not led to a sustained doctrinal work on par with the efforts conducted by the United States Air Force or the Royal Air Force. Historically, the FAF has not developed the institutional setting necessary to produce a sophisticated doctrine of force employment, and has relied on a ‘learning by doing approach’. Two attempts were made in 1997 and 2003 to establish a cohesive doctrine of force employment, both of which were unsuccessful, as fighter pilots (who hold most of the commanding positions in the FAF) felt it would question the heart of their professional identity: air-to-air combat.

The main capability upgrade for the FAF was the introduction of the multirole ‘Rafale’ plane from 2006 onwards. A technological success, and combat proven in Afghanistan, Libya, and Iraq, the ‘Rafale’ increased the fighting power of the FAF while being praised for its modularity. Yet, capability gaps still exist, notably in two fields: suppression of enemy air defences (SEAD) and strategic airlift. Beyond military interventions and the protection of the French airspace, the FAF is also part of the French nuclear deterrence capability by providing two squadrons (Rafale F3 and Mirage 2000-N) equipped with ASMP-A missiles. Introduced in 1964, this capability remains vital to the structure of the FAF.
Like the other services, the FAF has been hit by budget and format reductions: it is planned that 200 fighter planes will be available in 2020, compared to 380 in 2000. This drastic reduction is partly compensated for by the increase in the overall quality of the planes (with the ‘Rafales’ gradually replacing older models) and the acquisition of UCAVs (12 to 16 ‘Reapers’). Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the fact that, just as for the navy, the overall reduction in format implies diminished resilience and flexibility.

Conclusion
France remains a committed and significant military power in terms of the robustness of its executive chain of command, the breadth of military capabilities it maintains, and the range of operations it undertakes. There is no fundamental contestation in France of this engagement. Political parties that differ on certain foreign-policy priorities are united on the importance of maintaining military relevance, and public opinion is equally durably in favour of military relevance. The terrorist attacks in 2015, first in January against the magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and then the wider attack in November on the Bataclan nightclub and other public places, naturally mobilized opinion in favour of a strong defence effort. Still, and looking beyond this year of calamity, French public and political opinion testifies to a long-standing militarist base that enables security and defence-policy activism.

Defence relevance is a continuing challenge of adaptation, however, and France is challenged in several related respects. The first concerns its Gaullist legacy and the historical emphasis on independence and strategic autonomy. Once a platform for generating republican consensus, it has to a certain extent become an obstacle for clarifying French options for cooperation in a connected and globalizing world. In short, France is in need of a new grand narrative that defines options for a twenty-first-century middle-range power. The trend, though, as witnessed by the White Books, among other things, is towards greater partisanship.

Another challenge is financial. France, like most European countries, has great public debt, struggles to generate growth and public surplus, and thus struggles to finance defence efforts. France has responded firmly to the 2015 attacks, also in budgetary terms, but the public purse is strained. The sustainability of the defence effort will be in doubt for as long as economic growth is sluggish and public debt high.
A third and final challenge is to solidify the Europe’s collective security institutions, both the EU and NATO. Britain is now exiting the EU, leaving France as the EU’s most capable military actor. In some respects, this might be politically advantageous, perhaps especially in regard to generating a Europeanized defence market for France’s defence industry. However, France now lacks Britain in its balancing of German economic leadership in the EU, and Germany is slowly moving into a leadership role in defence affairs. Moreover, defence transformation will continue to be defined by the United States and will thus involve NATO, especially in the light of a resurgent Russia (which threat has not yet led to a drastic policy change in France).

Life at the middle range of power is thus not simple. To remain relevant, France must invest in economic growth and a renewed public imagination, both of which are hard to do. However, France has great defence assets, and it will unquestionably remain at the heart of Western defence efforts.

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