



French Hard Power: Living on the Strategic Edge

By Dorothee Fouchaux

The following National Security Outlook is the ninth in AEI's Hard Power series, a project of the Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies. In it, Dorothee Fouchaux examines the state of French forces and France's most recent effort to prioritize its strategic goals and square them with its military capabilities.¹ Certainly since Charles de Gaulle's presidency, France has maintained a tradition of thinking strategically for itself—often, admittedly, to the aggravation of its allies. This tradition remains strong and, if anything, has been reinforced in recent years by the sense that the United States is pivoting away from Europe and would like to reduce its footprint in Europe's troubled periphery. With its latest defense white paper, Paris has laid out a program to maintain its “strategic autonomy” through a combination of nuclear deterrence, enhanced intelligence efforts, and discrete power-projection capabilities. But France faces flat defense budgets, the increased cost of its military interventions in Africa, and prospects that budget shortfalls will not be overcome by the sale of public shares of national defense companies or export sales of military hardware. Consequently, some doubt that an even smaller French force will have sufficient resources to address existing problems in readiness and needed capabilities while sustaining a defense research-and-development base sufficient to keep future French forces armed with advanced equipment. In short, France really is living on the strategic edge.

—Gary Schmitt, Director, Marilyn Ware Center for Security Studies at AEI

Before the publication of France's latest defense white paper in April 2013, French newspapers were predicting a virtual “tsunami” in cuts to the country's defense budget and force structure.² Although the finance ministry hoped to use savings from a greatly reduced defense budget to help bring the country's public deficit down to less than 3 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, key members of the French Parliament, and the French defense industry lobbied French President François Hollande to stave off deep cuts to the military.³ Then, in a televised speech a month before the white paper's

publication, Hollande said defense would not face greater budget reductions than any other government ministry.

Key points in this Outlook:

- With its 2013 defense white paper, France reaffirmed its intent to maintain its strategic autonomy by dint of its nuclear deterrent and by retaining a conventional power-projection capability.
- To carry out this program and do so while facing budget constraints, French forces will continue to decline both in total numbers and numbers deployable.
- Meeting the white paper's goals rests on potentially overly optimistic assumptions about program savings, export offsets, and future European defense cooperation.

Dorothee Fouchaux (dfouchaux@live.fr) is a French defense analyst who has worked at the European Society of Strategic Intelligence and the French Ministry of Defence, Delegation for Strategic Affairs, as a research officer.

According to the appropriations statute that follows and implements the white paper's program, the French defense budget will flat line at €3.38 billion over the next two years and creep ever so slowly to €32.51 billion in 2019. A decline, to be sure, from the resource expectations set out in the 2008 white paper—but not as precipitous as some had predicted.⁴

French defense firms are seen as a pillar of French industry, providing high-skilled jobs and generating technological innovations for both the military and civilian sectors.

Although not as confident sounding as the 2008 white paper with regard to France's ability to meet the security challenges of the current year, the 2013 white paper nevertheless maintains the country's core strategic ambitions by protecting the defense budget in three areas: "autonomy in decision-making, protection of the French territory, [and] nuclear deterrence."⁵ The question, however, is whether even after fending off more serious cuts, there remain sufficient resources for France to retain its capacity to field an adequately sized, fully trained, and modernized force that can meet those strategic goals.

Indeed, there is already a gap of approximately €45 billion between the military's past plans and resulting budgets.⁶ And should the French economy continue to lag, there will be pressure again to look to the defense budget for additional savings. In short, is the 2013 white paper a realistic assessment of the future of French defense capabilities, or does it signal the start of a subtle but noticeable decline in the country's strategic ambitions?

Transformation in an Era of Declining Resources

Since the end of the Cold War, France has, like other major Western powers, set about reforming its armed forces to meet the challenges of the new security environment. In 1994, a government white paper sought to create a plan for the military that no longer focused on dealing with a threat posed by the Soviet Union, but instead was directed at dealing with pockets of instability around the globe, the increased risk tied to the proliferation of weapons of mass

destruction, and the appearance of asymmetric threats such as terrorism.

To maintain strategic relevance, the government reasoned that while it needed to maintain its nuclear forces as a hedge against the threat of proliferation and to support French foreign policy independence, France required a new model for its armed forces. The Model 2015 (as it was then called) was to be "a professional, more compact army, better equipped, better adapted to actions outside the national territory. Its capacities were defined so as to allow, simultaneously, the development of permanent arrangement of prevention, a visible and significant presence in an international coalition, as well as more limited operations under national command, while providing the protection of the territory and its approaches."⁷

When Jacques Chirac came to power in 1995, the government decided to end peacetime conscription and create an all-professional armed force. The goal was to form a military that would be readily deployable; could operate modern, complex weapon systems; and was capable of operating within an international coalition. This was a fundamental transformation of the French military both in terms of capabilities and size. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' annual *Military Balance*, France's active duty forces in 1997 totaled 358,800 (203,200 army, 63,300 navy, and 78,100 air force); in 2002, the numbers were 259,050 (137,000 army, 44,250 navy, and 64,000 air force).⁸ In 2012, French active-duty personnel had shrunk to 228,850 (122,500 army, 38,650 navy, and 49,850 air force).⁹ By 2020, the expectation is that the military's active-duty numbers will decline even further, dropping to approximately 190,000.¹⁰

At the same time that France was moving to an all-professional force, the government launched several major acquisition programs. These included the Tiger attack helicopter; the NH90 multirole helicopter; the armored infantry combat vehicles (VBCI); the nuclear-powered Barracuda-class attack submarines; and SAMP/T, a theater antimissile defense system. During this period, France also introduced into its fleet Europe's largest warship, the nuclear aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*; a new generation of nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs); and launched two Helios 1 optical surveillance satellites.

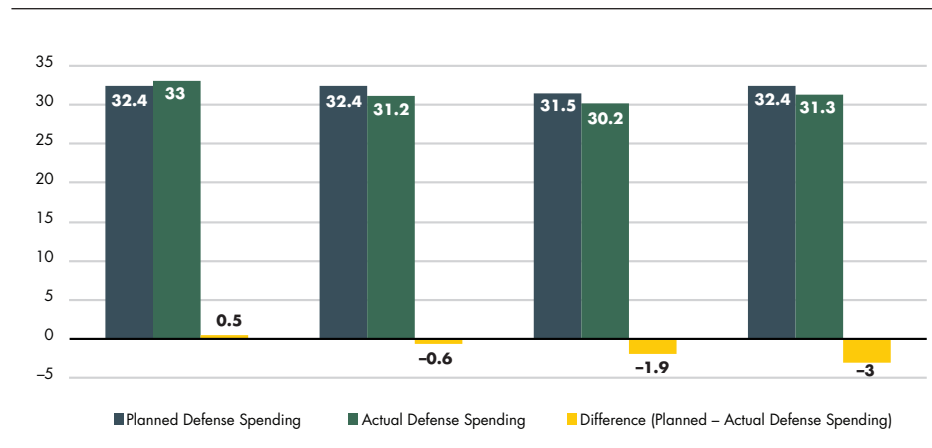
Though France's defense spending as a percentage of GDP started to decrease during that time, it dropped even further during 1997–2002, when France was

governed by a coalition led by the Socialist Party. In 2002, the defense budget dropped to €28.85 billion (excluding pensions)—the lowest total since the end of the Cold War.¹¹ In addition to cuts in training and procurement, research and development (R&D) funding decreased by some 30 percent between 1997 and 2002. As in other Western countries, cuts in defense spending were used by the government as a means to reduce the public deficit.

The third white paper was released in summer 2008 following Nicolas Sarkozy's election as president the year before.¹² The paper, which purports to rest on a "strategic appraisal for the next fifteen years," highlights the threats posed by cyber warfare, transnational actors, and nuclear proliferation. It puts special emphasis on increasing French intelligence capabilities to meet France's evolving security needs. It also announced the continued downsizing of defense personnel (civilian and military) by 54,900. To be carried out over a six-year period, the downsizing was intended to free up monies to spend on new modernization programs for France's conventional and nuclear forces and the continuation of existing acquisition programs such as the army's FELIN infantry combat system and the navy's multirole frigate program (FREMM). The paper also set as a goal for the French government of it being capable of deploying 30,000 soldiers abroad, with necessary air and naval support forces, for one year.

The economic crisis that followed the issuance of the 2008 white paper, however, made it fiscally challenging for the government to meet the paper's goals. As figure 1 shows, the difference between planned and actual procurement expenditures had risen to more than €3 billion between 2009 and 2012. Several factors explain this decline, including the unexpected cost of operations in Libya in 2011, the expenditures related to creating the French military base in Abu Dhabi, and France's reintegration into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's military command structure. In addition, the government expected to reap more savings than occurred with the previous downsizing of the French military and civilian defense workforce.¹³ Consequently, in 2012 the defense

FIGURE 1
PLANNED SPENDING AND ACTUAL SPENDING (BILLIONS €)



Source: French National Assembly, *Rapport d'Information No. 1388* [Information Report No. 1388] (September 18, 2013), 20, www.assemblee-nationale.fr/14/pdf/rap-info/i1388.pdf.

ministry decided to postpone €5.5 billion in procurement to help bring the budget back in line with existing resources.¹⁴

A Shrinking Margin of Defense

The next defense white paper was published in 2013. Though originally only intended to be an update of the 2008 white paper, the global financial crisis, Arab Spring, American pivot to Asia, and French intervention in Mali necessitated significant changes, resulting in a new document. The new paper also provided the recently elected President Hollande an opportunity to put his own stamp on French defense policy.

France had not had a Socialist president in nearly two decades, and the last Socialist government was perceived as particularly difficult for the French military. Despite Hollande's statements to the effect that France needed to provide for its own security and maintain its nuclear deterrent, the defense community's memory of the previous Socialist government combined with the ongoing economic crisis led many to expect the worst. On its face, however, the 2013 white paper was not a major break from its 2008 predecessor. Nevertheless, because the document calls for further reduction in forces, argues for resizing the geographic region in which French military interventions would be legitimate, and indicates that military resources will be divvied up depending on the readiness and operational requirements of particular military units, the white paper's broader implications require more analysis.

In addition to eliminating 24,000 employees from the current staffing of the defense ministry, including troops and civilians (a figure that increases to nearly 34,000 when the 10,000 planned but still unexecuted cuts from 2008 are factored in), the white paper provides for a reorganization of the armed forces on the basis of what it calls “the principle of differentiation.” Although exact details on the principle’s implementation were not provided by the paper, it is described as “giving priority to the equipment and training” of some elements of the armed forces versus others. When combined with the effort to save additional monies by financing “costly or cutting-edge capabilities only when they are indispensable and benefit, in particular, forces set up to combat state-level actors,”¹⁵ the two initiatives will undoubtedly have an impact on the state of the French military going forward.

The white paper appears to suggest that there will be a two-tiered system for the armed forces: one well-equipped and trained, the other slated for domestic security missions not requiring sophisticated or costly equipment.¹⁶ The military personnel involved in domestic operations will have fewer opportunities to participate in operations abroad and will train with equipment that is less than state of the art. On the whole, this makes the French Army less attractive as a profession, and could lead to major problems operationally should those troops be required to conduct operations abroad.

A second major concern generated by the white paper is its implications for military procurement. Last March, France’s largest defense firms wrote a letter to Hollande expressing their concerns that when it comes to possible cuts in defense spending, “it is essential that industrial and socio-economic issues be taken into account as seriously as budget issues.”¹⁷

The defense budget is perceived differently than other elements of public spending. French defense firms are seen as a pillar of French industry, providing high-skilled jobs and generating technological innovations that are of use in both the military and civilian domains. The defense industry also contributes positively to the country’s balance of trade: one-third of its annual revenue, nearly €15 billion, comes from defense-related exports.¹⁸

To square the circle of saving money but maintaining France’s defense industrial base, Hollande decided to continue procurement of most major weapons systems but simultaneously renegotiate the contracts for those systems by either buying fewer allotments or delaying deliveries and payments. Defense companies were compensated for the renegotiation of these contracts with firm orders in

the amount of €45.2 billion (see table 1).¹⁹ And while the French military remains one of the best-equipped militaries in the world in terms of the systems themselves, there are increasing worries as to whether they will be fielded in operationally relevant numbers.

TABLE 1
Orders for Major Weapons Systems

Programs	2008 Planned Orders	Firm Orders
A400M aircraft	50	50
Rafale aircraft	286	180
Barracuda-class submarines	6	3
FREMM frigates	11	11
ASTER missiles	575	535
Naval cruise missiles	200	200
NH90 helicopters	160	61
Tiger attack helicopters	80	80
FELIN equipment	22,588	22,588
VBCI armored vehicles	630	630

Sources: Directorate General of Armaments, “Equipment” [Equipment], www.defense.gouv.fr/dga/equipement; and French Court of Auditors, *Le bilan à mi-parcours de la loi de programmation militaire* [Midterm Review on the Military Programming Law] (Paris, July 2012), 71, www.livreblancdefenseetsecurite.gouv.fr/pdf/2012_07_11-cour_des_comptes_rapport_thematique_bilan_lpm.pdf.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the French Armed Forces

Strategic Forces. Nuclear deterrence remains at the heart of French defense policy; it is seen as guaranteeing France a prominent place on the international stage and, as then-presidential candidate Hollande said in March 2012, protecting “the autonomy of our choices.”²⁰

France’s nuclear forces consist of four ballistic missile-carrying submarines and a squadron of fighter bombers carrying cruise missiles. Ten percent of the overall defense budget and 20 percent of R&D funds go to maintaining these forces.²¹ Although few in France question the need to retain a nuclear deterrent, some have argued that the aerial component is not required to sustain deterrence and, hence, could be shed to save money.²² But as a recent report of the French Senate points out, the government is not facing an immediate need to spend large new sums to maintain its nuclear deterrent.²³ Previous investments in modernization have resulted in the deployment of a new generation of SSBNs;

acquisition of a new ballistic missile and an advanced medium-range cruise missile; and the addition of the Rafale, a fourth-generation fighter jet, to its aerial nuclear strike force.

Critics of the 2013 white paper have argued that it will relegate France to being a second-tier power.

Army. The French army retains 106,000 soldiers in 81 specialized regiments, making it one of the largest armies in Europe. It is also one of the best equipped with VBCIs, an integrated infantry combat system (FELIN), self-propelled howitzers (CAESER), and attack helicopters (Tiger).²⁴ But getting the most out of this equipment requires sustained training. In 2012, the army's days for training were down to 105 even though the law governing the French military for 2009–14 had authorized 120. The French court of auditors (Cour des Comptes) noted that even this level was somewhat misleading in that much of the training activity is focused on units deploying for low-intensity or counterinsurgency operations overseas, meaning the army has less time to hone other skills in areas of “high-intensity” conventional combat.²⁵

Again, in an effort to reconcile reduced resources with the necessities of keeping the force modernized and trained, the white paper states that the army will make significant cuts to existing fleets of tanks and combat vehicles, while moving forward with a new generation of SCORPION networked armored combat vehicles. At the same time, however, the 2013 white paper has called for cutting in half the 2008 white paper's goal of being able to deploy 30,000 French troops. As the French chief of staff said, the 2008 white paper's objective was “unattainable” given current resources.²⁶ This reduction in capability has been criticized by others, including General Vincent Desportes, former head of the Joint Service Defense College, who suggested that this and other measures laid out in the 2013 white paper would “[relegate] France to a second tier. France will be unable to influence major strategic options internationally. Its role will be that of a junior partner.”²⁷

Although the French army is relatively small, the operational skills of its helicopter pilots are considerable, including the ability to conduct missions at night.²⁸ The recent experience in Mali, and above all in Afghanistan,

has shown the importance of having a relatively large fleet of multirole helicopters available. According to the 2013 white paper, the goal is for the army to be equipped with 140 reconnaissance and attack helicopters, 115 tactical helicopters, and 30 tactical drones.²⁹

Navy. The French navy now has 1 aircraft carrier, 75 vessels and logistics ships, 4 nuclear-powered SSBNs, 6 nuclear-powered attack submarines, and less than 40,000 men. Since 2008, navy personnel have been cut by 6,000. Nineteen ships were taken out of service between 2009 and 2012, and only four new ships were added. According to Admiral Bernard Rogel, navy chief of staff, the size of the French fleet is “sufficient but just barely.”³⁰ That said, the navy's budget for 2013 is set at €4.273 billion, the highest budget for equipment in the French armed forces.

Moreover, the French navy is one of the best trained in Europe, with 91 days at sea in 2010 and 92 in 2011. And major components of the fleet—SSBNs, amphibious assault ships, naval fighters, marine helicopters, and aircraft carriers—have recently been modernized or are in the process of being modernized. Plans are for France to replace its six Rubis-class, nuclear-powered attack submarines with the latest generation of Barracuda-class submarines, although only one is currently under construction. Finally, the 2013 white paper states that existing shortfalls in other parts of the fleet will be addressed with the acquisition of “15 first-class frigates, about 15 patrol vessels and six surveillance frigates, as well as maritime patrol aircraft and a mine warfare capability sufficient to protect our approaches and projection in expeditionary operations.”³¹

Given budget constraints, however, there are concerns that orders for the FREMM frigates may still be cut back. France has already reduced its orders from 18 in 2005 to 11 in 2008. In June, reports said the final number may be as low as 9 or even 8.³² But since the purpose of this program was to acquire frigates capable of performing missions that are currently carried out by several vessels, any reduction in the order will both increase the unit price for new FREMMs and require costly overhauls and modifications to existing platforms, such as the older La Fayette-class frigates.³³

Air Force. The French air force has also undergone profound changes since 2008. Personnel numbers dropped from 66,000 to 50,000, its air fleet was reduced by 30 percent, 6 fighter squadrons were disbanded, and 8 air bases in France plus another 4 overseas were closed.

The 2013 white paper has announced that the air force fleet will be further reduced; the stated objective is 225 aircraft in place of the 300 planned in 2008. This means the air force will also reduce its orders for the Rafale multirole fighter and will look to extend the life of existing Mirages. In addition, the air force will be reducing the number of aircraft available for major operations from 70 to just 45.³⁴

As a percentage of French GDP, defense
is less of a national priority today.

The air force is the branch of the armed forces with the most obvious capability gaps that, in turn, are in tension with France's efforts to maintain its strategic autonomy. The French fleet lacks long-distance strategic airlift. France has no equivalent to the US Air Force's C-5 Galaxy or C-17 Globemaster III. France's fleet of smaller tactical transport aircraft is composed of 54 C-130 Hercules and Transall aircraft.³⁵ The lifespan of the C-160 Transall, which was put into service in 1967, has had to be extended because of delays in production and deliveries of Airbus A400Ms.

But with "downtimes" for repairs more frequent than newer planes, the C-160 has been expensive to maintain and operate. Further, the eight CASA/IPTN CN-235s acquired to fill the gap do not meet force projection needs, as was the case of the 2013 operation in Mali that required air logistic support from French allies.³⁶ In addition, resource constraints resulting from operations in Libya and Mali have impacted flight hours available to French pilots for training. The situation is particularly worrisome for transport pilots, who have had an activity level of only 287 hours instead of the planned 400.³⁷ Finally, it is worth noting that while the 2008 white paper set as an objective 70 tactical transport aircraft for the French air fleet, the 2013 paper lists "about 50."

The second significant gap in the air force's capabilities concerns tanker aircraft; in both the operation over Libya and the operation over Mali, the French required allied tanker support. In Operation Unified Protector (Libya), for example, the United States performed about 70 percent of in-flight refueling missions whereas France performed only about 10 percent.³⁸ The A330 MRTT is intended to replace the current aging fleet of French tankers. The first delivery of the plane, however, is not expected until 2017 at the earliest; the last is not expected until 2024.³⁹ The air force was planning to order

14 planes, but that number has now dropped to 12 tankers—a number that is probably insufficient if recent operations are a benchmark.⁴⁰

Finally, the military intervention in Libya in 2011 also revealed the French air force's lagging capacity to neutralize land-based air-defense systems. In this instance, most Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD) missions were performed by American forces despite the fact that Libya's air defenses were relatively weak.⁴¹ France could potentially modify the AASM (a modular air-to-ground missile) to carry a passive electromagnetic homing system to give it the SEAD capacity it currently lacks.⁴² However, until it can acquire such a system, the air force will not have the ability to take the lead in similar air operations.

Intelligence. The white paper says intelligence "must serve political and strategic decision-making as much as it serves planning and tactical conduct of operations. It should also shed light on our foreign and economic policies."⁴³ French intelligence services are known for their efficiency even though they have fewer resources with which to work than their major allies: 1.3 percent of the defense ministry's budget was designated for intelligence, or €655 million in appropriations, in 2013.⁴⁴

Since the 2008 white paper, the government has placed increased emphasis on building up French intelligence capabilities, especially in the area of cyber, with special attention being paid to creating an offensive capability and in air- and space-based intelligence systems.⁴⁵ The equipment France uses to gather and analyze intelligence has changed significantly since the end of the Cold War. France now has strategic and tactical intelligence resources that it did not have during the wars in the Persian Gulf and Bosnia, when France was largely dependent on American strategic and tactical intelligence assets.

Maintaining and increasing that capability is also key to the French government's efforts to enhance France's strategic autonomy. While France was the coalition's second-largest contributor to intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance during operations in Libya in 2011, and despite the United States declaring it was "leading from behind," American Predator drones guided the French on their way to strike bunkers in Tripoli.⁴⁶ Accordingly, the French defense minister has affirmed that "several programs, too long delayed, have now been decided on and amplified: observation satellites, electronic listening satellites, embedded resources in airborne platforms, combat and tactical unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs),

and light surveillance and observation aircraft with their sensors.”⁴⁷ To that end, France’s goal is also to have at its disposal 12 UAVs and 7 detection and surveillance aircraft, in comparison with the 4 detection and surveillance aircraft in service today.⁴⁸

Priority Zones and Pooling and Sharing

For 20 years, the French military has been involved in numerous operations abroad, with the justification being, *inter alia*, the responsibility to protect the innocent, the war against terrorism, humanitarian crises, and missions of stability or peacekeeping.

A review of French military interventions reveals that African conflicts are a French trademark. Since 1990, French armed forces have been involved in more than 20 African operations including in Rwanda, Somalia, Zaire, Comoros, Cameroon, the Republic of the Congo, Cote D’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Gulf of Aden, Chad, Libya, and Mali.

Several of these interventions have involved the commitment of significant French military resources. In Operation Licorne in the Côte d’Ivoire, French troop presence increased to a height of 1,600. In Operation Harmattan in Libya, France committed fighter and reconnaissance aircraft, aerial refuelers, an airborne command and control plane, an aircraft carrier, an amphibious assault helicopter carrier, frigates, destroyers, and submarines. In Operation Serval in Mali, more than 4,000 French soldiers were deployed and more than 1,000 remain in country to support the new government and conduct stability operations. And even more recently, in December, France sent 1,200 troops to the Central African Republic to help restore order and disarm the Muslim militias who had deposed the country’s president earlier in the year.⁴⁹

French forces have been deployed outside the African theater as well. Since the Cold War’s end, French troops have been involved in several multilateral interventions, including the First Gulf War (contributing nearly 18,000 military personnel); the conflicts in the Balkans; in Lebanon as a major contributor to the United Nations Interim Force; and in Afghanistan, where France deployed more than 60,000 soldiers from 2001 to 2012.

But the cost of these interventions combined with the apparent lack of success in missions as in the case of Afghanistan have resulted in France’s decision to scale back its strategic sights and more strictly define “priority zones” for its military interventions. These priority zones are the European periphery, the Mediterranean Basin, the

Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and Northern Africa from the Sahel to the equatorial countries. The Sahel corresponds to the zone of vital interest that France should, it believes, be able to defend. As a result of France’s historical presence, Africa is home to one of the largest groups of French expatriates: more than 210,000 French citizens live there.⁵⁰ Additionally, special defense agreements with Gabon, Senegal, Djibouti, and Chad give France a higher degree of legitimacy and an operational advantage when it comes to intervening in the region.

Moreover, major security challenges exist just outside the gates of Europe, with the rise in terrorism and criminal activities resulting from instability in the wake of the Arab Spring and the need to secure major resource and supply routes from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. Indeed, America’s planned pivot to Asia and its reluctance to intervene further in the Middle East was duly noted in the 2013 white paper: “The evolving strategic context may place our country in a position in which we are obliged to take the initiative in operations, or to assume, more often than in the past, a significant part of the responsibilities involved in conducting military operations.”⁵¹

Given this strategic context, it is no surprise that France is attempting once again to jumpstart the European common defense effort. After the principle of differentiation within French forces and the concept of strategic autonomy, the white paper’s third pillar of French defense policy is greater reliance on the pooling and sharing of defense capabilities by European powers. The decrease of European defense capabilities combined with the budgetary crisis is seen as an opportunity to promote greater cooperation among countries in defense of European vital interests. As the white paper puts it, France aims for greater pooling of capabilities on the European level to “replace forced dependency with organized interdependency.”⁵² To obtain this goal, however, Europe’s capitals will need to establish a deeper consensus on the most important security issues they might face and a greater willingness to address them by joint action.

It will also require a tough-love approach to Europe’s national defense companies who, with the continuing decline in European defense spending, face a smaller market at home and increased competition from the United States, Russia, and China abroad. The risk is that the budgetary pressures on investment in the short term will translate into a general decline in the specialized industrial know-how that the companies must maintain if they are to remain competitive. To avoid this, European

capitals will have to put aside the desire to protect their respective national companies and allow a continent-wide restructuring of Europe's defense industry to move forward.⁵³

Conclusion

French military ambitions are increasingly limited by the economic crisis and France's fiscal problems. As a percentage of French GDP, defense is less of a national priority today. (In 1997, the military budget equaled 2 percent of GDP; today, it stands at approximately 1.5 percent.) That said, France's decision to intervene in Mali this past year is a sober reminder of France's need to maintain serious military capabilities to protect its interests and address the existing gaps in needed capabilities.

But the actual risk France runs lies less in the condition of today's French forces than in their future state. Essentially freezing the defense budget for several years as planned will cost the French military in a number of ways. By not replacing equipment in an orderly fashion, an increasing portion of the defense budget will go to maintaining aging equipment; already, the amount devoted to maintenance is up by 8 percent in 2013.⁵⁴ Indeed, according to the French chief of the defense staff, estimates in 2013 for the availability of armored personnel carriers, frigates, and combat planes would be 40, 48, and 60 percent, respectively.⁵⁵ And while French forces are no longer in Afghanistan, budget constraints will make it more difficult to keep training levels up to previous standards, which is a must for some units such as joint tactical battalions that, moving forward, will be the core building block for French interventionist forces. Moreover, if France wants to continue to be a global leader in developing and fielding military technologies, it will need to maintain a significant level of investments in R&D. In fact, before the expiration of the recently passed military programming law in 2019, France will need to have begun work on next-generation weapons systems if it expects to sustain itself as a modern fighting force.

Naturally consumed with dealing with today's problems, the fact remains that it is President Hollande's responsibility to plan for the armed forces of 2035. And even though Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian has stated that he intends to safeguard the defense budget until 2016, French Parliament members' temptation to make defense even more so the "bill payer" for reducing the government's deficit will remain. And past history

provides little support for that pledge as no multiyear military programming law passed by the legislature has ever escaped modification by the government and French legislators in subsequent years. The state of the French military is at a critical juncture. A wrong step now could leave France with a future military that can no longer adequately address the country's security interests or sustain its goal of strategic autonomy.

Notes

1. To read the other eight *National Security Outlooks* in this series, see Gary J. Schmitt, "A Hard Look at Hard Power: Assessing the Defense Capabilities of US Allies and Security Partners," December 23, 2013, www.aei.org/issues/military-hard-power.

2. Government of France, *Livre Blanc: Défense et Sécurité Nationale 2013* [White Paper: Defense and National Security 2013] (Paris, 2013), www.gouvernement.fr/sites/default/files/fichiers/_joints/livre-blanc-sur-la-defense-et-la-securite-nationale_2013.pdf. As an example of press reports about expected cuts to defense, see Michel Cabirol, "Un tsunami s'annonce sur le budget de la Défense" [Promise of a Tsunami in the Defense Budget], *La Tribune*, July 12, 2012, www.latribune.fr/entreprises-finance/industrie/aeronautique-defense/20120711trib000708598/un-tsunami-s-annonce-sur-le-budget-de-la-defense.html.

3. Heads of the seven major French defense firms (Thales, Nexter, DCNS SA, Dassault Aviation, Safran, MBDA, and European Aeronautic Defence and Space Company NV) sent a letter to the French president stating, "It is essential that industrial and socio-economic issues be taken into account as seriously as budget issues." In addition, five political groups from across the political spectrum stated their concerns about reductions in defense spending in July 2012 during a meeting of the French Senate's foreign affairs, defense, and armed forces committee. See "Inquiets, les industriels de l'armement demandent audience à l'Elysée" [Concerned, the Arms Manufacturers Require Hearing at the Elysée], *Les Échos*, March 13, 2013, www.lesechos.fr/13/03/2013/LesEchos/21395-064-ECH_inquiets-les-industriels-de-l-armement-demandent-audience-a-l-elysee.htm; and French Senate, "Le seuil de 1,5 percent du PIB consacré à l'effort de défense est incompressible" [The 1.5 Percent of GDP Devoted to Defense is an Incompressible Amount], July 26, 2012, www.senat.fr/presse/cp20120726a.html.

4. Government of France, "LOI n° 2013-1168 du 18 décembre 2013 relative à la programmation militaire pour les années 2014 à 2019 et portant diverses dispositions concernant la défense et la sécurité nationale" [Law No. 2013-1168 of December 18, 2013, Pertaining to the Military Program for the Years 2014 to 2019], January 1, 2014, www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do;jsessionid=?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000028338825.

5. "Entretien du président de la République sur France 2" [Interview with the President of the Republic on France 2], France 2, March 28, 2013, www.elysee.fr/interviews/article/entretien-du-president-de-la-republique-sur-france/.

6. Vincent Lamigeon, "Défense et livre blanc: la demi-victoire budgétaire des militaires et de l'industrie de l'armement" [Defense White Paper: Fiscal Half-Victory for the Military and the Defense Industry], *Challenges*, April 4, 2013, www.challenges.fr/economie/20130404.CHA7981/bercy-defense-et-livre-blanc-la-demi-victoire-budgetaire-des-militaires-et-de-l-industrie-de-l-armement.html.

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