



France's nuclear deterrence now rests with the ASMP air-launched missile and with its ballistic-missile submarines

French revolution

France's defences have been put under the microscope.

JULIAN MOXON/PARIS

S EVEN YEARS AFTER the fall of the Berlin Wall, France has carried out its most far-reaching defence review since the end of the Second World War.

The Dassault Aviation Rafale fighter, the Eurocopter Tiger attack helicopter and NH Industries NH 90 medium-lift helicopter have been retained in the budget plans, although all three appear to have suffered production delays or reductions in numbers to be purchased. The Future Large Aircraft (FLA) is the only apparent large project to be dropped.

The changes laid out by President Jacques Chirac on 23 February in *Une Defense Nouvelle* cover the period 1997-2015, and will, if fully implemented, fundamentally change the way in which France structures its weapons-procurement programmes.

France wants to avoid the prob-

lems it faced during the Gulf War, when it discovered that its troops were ill-equipped for the kind of rapid, well-armed deployment which the war demanded, while the air force was unable to transport men to the battlefield with sufficient speed.

According to French defence minister Charles Millon, defence programmes will now be subject to far tougher scrutiny before they see the light of day, and will be selected more with a view to meeting the needs posed by a European defence force than to satisfy mainly French requirements.

"Splendid isolation is no longer workable," he says. France's defence industry will thus no longer be able to rely automatically on government backing for programmes to satisfy national defence policy. Instead, it will have to forge alliances, first with French and then with other European companies, if it is to survive.

Une Defense Nouvelle spells out France's intention of creating a "new army", based on a force of 434,000 volunteers instead of 577,360 conscripts, the retention of modernised air- and sea-based nuclear deterrents (but retiring the

land-based component), and continued modernisation of army, air force and navy weapons.

In the new five-year defence plan, the equipment budget has been reduced by 18% over the period 1997-2002, saving the Government Fr104 billion (\$20.5 billion) a year over the previous administration's 1995-2000 budget. This foresaw a Fr624 billion equipment expenditure for the period, which has now been reduced to Fr516 billion.

Total defence spending will now amount to Fr185 billion a year (1995 francs), equivalent to the outlay for 1995 (Fr189.6 billion), but less than the original plan, and only slightly inferior to the 1996 budget. In real terms, this means it will slip by around 1% each year.

The armed forces will take some solace from having at least obtained a stable five-year budget, with Chirac's promise that he will "...personally ensure that the five-year plan is respected", reflecting cynicism about the fate of several recent plans.

On 26 February, Millon explained to industry chiefs the Government's long-term defence strategy up to 2015. He made clear

the intention to pursue multi-year procurement programmes, again aiming for stability in place of uncertainty.

The reductions in equipment expenditure would have been far worse had not the Government made such large cuts in armed forces personnel. Most programmes will therefore remain more or less intact, although significant delays in production start-up for some weapons have been confirmed.

EQUIPMENT DECISIONS

The future for the Fr200 billion Rafale programme is now virtually certain, although it has long been criticised by some in the Government as too expensive. Speculation in Paris is that the money was kept flowing as a sweetener for the forced merger between Dassault and Aerospatiale demanded by Chirac (*Flight International*, 28 February - 5 March).

Delivery of the first Rafales (for the navy) has been delayed by around 30 months, until the end of 2000. The numbers to be purchased remain unclear, but some sources indicate that the original figure of 86 aircraft may be reduced to 60. The air force will now receive