

OPINION

In the Defense of Europe: Arms and Issues

'Continental Couple' Is Only a Dream

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — Do France and West Germany add up to West European security? The idea of a "continental couple" linked by France's *force de dissuasion* and West Germany's economic might was first launched by former chancellor Helmut Schmidt in 1984. Suddenly, it has been picked up by former office holders on the other side of the Rhine — by the former president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the former prime minister Laurent Fabius and the former foreign minister Roland Dumas.

The dream of a "defense nucleus" makes sense. It appears particularly alluring at a time when the United States is again showing withdrawal symptoms in musing about hefty troop cuts and preparing for the elim-

But the real problems lurk behind the numbers game. The most critical is clad in a French dictum: *Le nucléaire ne se partage pas* — nuclear weapons protect their possessors only. Hence, proclaims the official French "White Book on Defense," "deterrence is exclusively national;" hence, "the nuclear risk cannot be shared." Nor have French leaders ever tried to say otherwise of nuclear Gaullism. "By nature and definition," proclaimed President François Mitterrand's first defense minister, Charles Hernu, "nuclear deterrence exists to protect the inviolable national territory. *We would lie, if we said that the French are ready to shield Germany with their nuclear deterrent.*" (The emphasis here has been added.)

Endlessly repeated, these *ex cathedra* pronouncements are rooted in a solid fact: The French nuclear umbrella depends on the American one, and hence it cannot play the substitute. Even in the mid 1990s, the French will have no more than some 700 strategic warheads they could hurl into Soviet territory — which is precisely 7 percent of what the Soviet Union has today. Could such a puny potential be unsheathed on behalf of the Germans? The French would not dream of it. As a close collaborator of Mr. Hernu, François Heisbourg, who is an influential member of the French military-industrial establishment, put it: "A middle power cannot deliver an explicit nuclear guarantee to others without, at best, appearing ridiculous. Paris could not do what is already less than credible when coming from Washington. Deterrence of the strong by the weak has its rules."

Nor could the French possibly want to share their nuclear weapons with their former arch-enemies across the

Rhine. The *force de dissuasion* is the single-most important badge of distinction the French can hold up against the superior economic and demographic clout of the Germans. And the French built that force to buttress their sovereignty, not to dilute it.

What about a conventional "defense nucleus?" Despite Mr. Schmidt's offer to play the junior partner — which he never made when still in power — the Germans could not possibly want to discard their security dependence on a superpower in order to slip into the French embrace. Threadbare as the U.S. nuclear guarantee may have become, there is still a crucial add-on: more than 200 000 U.S. troops in a "hostage position" close to the potential place of battle.

Conversely, the smallish French contingent is tucked away in the southwest corner of the Federal Republic. The U.S. presence spells out the message: "An attack on West Germany is an attack on America." The French deployment, however, embodies a very different message, namely the option of non-belligerency. Similarly, the much-touted French *Force d'Action Rapide*, stationed in France, may or may not join the "forward battle." Like all French strategic reforms in the 1980s, this Rapid Action Force is designed to increase French options, not to diminish them, as any decent anti-abandonment posture must do.

The French, it is true, have tried to reassure their German neighbors in many ways since the turn of this decade, when they suddenly discovered the specter of German "nationalist neutralism" hovering over the Rhine. But the limits were laid down in the words of the Socialist premier in 1981-84, Pierre Mauroy: "France does not intend to suffer the consequences of conflicts that are not its own." Mr. Mitterrand himself pierced Mr. Schmidt's vision with just as brutal words: "The Atlantic Alliance is not about to be replaced by a European Alliance. The reason is that no [European] military power can substitute for the American arsenal."

Besides, can anyone imagine a defense union between two nations which, engaged in a joint helicopter project, haggled endlessly over whether the pilots should sit side by side or one behind the other?

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ination of all nuclear missiles beyond the 300-mile (500-kilometer) range. Yet a dream it is going to remain.

Mr. Schmidt's vision is straightforward enough. Between them, France and West Germany could "easily" muster two million men. France would be in charge of the venture; in exchange, the heirs of de Gaulle would extend their nuclear umbrella eastward to cover the Federal Republic.

Now to the realities. First, there is the "minor" problem of numbers. Together, French and German forces don't reach even one million today. Worse, the French are about to reduce their conventional forces in favor of nuclear modernization. And in Germany, babies seem to have gone out of style; by the mid-1990s, there won't be enough young men of draft age to maintain the peacetime strength of the *Bundeswehr*.