

‘Strike capability and our potential’ from Le Monde (20 July 1963)

Caption: In an article published in the French daily newspaper Le Monde on 20 July 1963, Maurice Faure, leader of the French Radical Party, speculates on the real deterrent capability of the national strike force.

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Strike capability and our potential

by Maurice Faure

The concept of a nuclear strike capability is first and foremost an element of overall foreign policy that we may either support or oppose, and it constitutes the backbone of that policy. We shall not dwell for the moment on that aspect of the question, essential though it is. Instead, we shall limit our observations simply to the technical aspects.

In the absence of comprehensive and monitored disarmament, there can be no questioning the fact that France must defend itself against any potential enemy. However, this protection has to be effective, and the Government's policy is not only unconvincing, it also gives us cause for concern.

We are being told that the mission of our strategic nuclear force is to deter a potential aggressor. There will therefore be no first use, merely retaliatory strikes.

But what will be hit? *Cities*, according to Mr Messmer in the *Revue de défense nationale*, and that puts us in a difficult moral position. It makes it more unlikely that we shall use our weapons if we are sure that we shall suffer similar and infinitely more destructive punishment in return.

And against what shall we be retaliating? An enemy missile attack? Or a conventional invasion backed up by a fifth column? We are not told. But these equally plausible scenarios clearly call for two different responses. If we are prepared for only one of them, it would create a critical flaw in our plan of action. Do we have the capacity to prepare for both?

But it goes even further than this. Deterrence means *convincing* the enemy that our response capability, which was the target of his initial attack, would survive that attack and that we would have enough left to retaliate with heavy strikes capable of hitting his vital installations to prevent him from attacking others. All this would take place with the enemy on full alert.

Mr Messmer knows full well that the first generation of our strategic nuclear force will never have 50 Mirage IV aircraft and that they will begin to be obsolete even before we take delivery of the final one. If, starting in 1965, France deploys about 40 Mirage IVs equipped with fission bombs of less than 50 kilotonnes, it will be difficult to rely on more than a dozen of them getting off the ground in time. We should not forget that our air-raid warning system, vital in such cases, is and will remain fully dependent on the NATO anti-missile detection and warning system. So who will scramble the General's Mirage IVs? Our allies?

What is more, our Mirages cannot reach their target without in-flight refuelling. The KC-135 tankers, bought for this purpose from the United States, are huge and extremely vulnerable aircraft that only a few airfields in France can accommodate.

Given that, are we expecting that twelve Mirages will breach enemy defences, whose strength Mr Messmer seems to ignore, while our allies have learnt to respect them? Greater Moscow alone is protected, along its western flank, by more than sixty launch ramps, each equipped with SA 1-type ground-to-air missiles with a range of 100 kilometres. More than a hundred other Soviet cities are also protected by missiles with a 50 kilometre range, whose accuracy was illustrated by the shooting down of an American U-2 aircraft flying at an altitude of about 60 000 feet. It could be argued that a ground-hugging aircraft is infinitely less vulnerable, and indeed it is. But it consumes more fuel. That means it would not be able to return to base and, in the best case scenario, would have to find refuge in a neighbouring country where it would, at the very least, be kept out of action.

Accordingly, prior to 1970, our security cannot be based on the 'deterrent' capacity of our own forces. That means that our current policy is based on the assumption that there will be no conflict before then or that our American allies will take responsibility for our defence.

Mr Messmer tells us that 1970 will see the launch of his first nuclear-powered submarine. We shall have to wait until 1975 before we have all three of them, the number required to represent a significant force. Coming ten years after the American submarines, these vessels will carry all our hopes, as well as several years of fissile material production. It is difficult to say how useful they will be at that stage.

It is an open question. Let us simply assume that the many technical problems that such an act of faith assumes will be resolved and accept the growing costs entailed (the scale of which only time will tell): producing miniaturised nuclear triggers of the requisite power in a tritium plant that has yet to be built; perfection and testing of Polaris-type missiles, whose flaws the US has not yet ironed out; developing a weapons system that protects against an improved enemy response capability, and an instantaneous transmission system through water, probably using a satellite relay.

All that just so that our first submarine might perhaps suffer the same fate as the *USS Thresher* ...

What could we fall back on if we did not have any other means available at that time?

We are told that missiles and land- and air-based launch pads are on the drawing-board but will not go into production until after 1970 for lack of money, of tried and tested methods and of a sufficient quantity of fissile material.

And what will become of our shrunken army, whose equipment will have been deliberately sacrificed? How quickly will the old Patton tanks, which cannot cover 100 km without breaking down, be phased out?

Clearly, the creation of a nuclear capability that can meet its objective entails the use of the most advanced technology, and is beyond our country's means. We shall always lag one generation behind potential foes, who, because they are ahead, will always have plenty of time to introduce effective counter measures. It is very unlikely that a surprise technical breakthrough will occur to alter this fundamental fact. It really does seem that it will be difficult for us, on our own, to dissuade the superpowers.

That is the conclusion that we have reached, and we have nothing further to say on the issue.

— For it is good that France has proved to the world that it could detonate a bomb, if only to contribute more effectively to the banning of its use.

— It is good that it has trained an entire team of experts and engineers in the most sophisticated areas of science and technology, particularly ballistics. For them, nuclear science has provided a training ground that they would not have had if they had merely copied other people's inventions and processes.

— And, finally, it is good that France has raised the issue of Europe's nuclear responsibilities and sensed that the American monopoly was not the ultimate solution in terms of our dignity and security.

We have never denied all that. But we do not believe that the necessary changes can be made at national level. The situation would be fundamentally different if Europe approached the nuclear debate as a single partner with the capacity for large-scale, independent action, with the political clout provided by the pooled use of nuclear weapons that it either produced or possessed and with the clear determination to establish a coordinated but independent defence capability.

This is the way forward that France should explore and for which it should become the resolute spokesman.

It might be argued that it is a long and difficult path. Indeed it is, but that is all the more reason for embarking upon it and persevering with it.

It has to be said that, at the moment, we are moving in the opposite direction.