

'Mitterrand: France's view on security and East–West relations' from Nouvelles atlantiques (30 September 1981)

Caption: On 30 September 1981, the journal Nouvelles atlantiques reports on the first press conference held on 24 September by the new French President François Mitterrand. With regard to security, he is particularly concerned at the mass deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles. In this context, the President states that France's security relies firstly on its ability to defend itself and only secondly on the quality and swiftness of its alliances. France will therefore continue to adopt its own deterrent strategy and will pursue its development of the neutron bomb.

Source: 'Mitterrand: France's views on security and East West relations' from Atlantic News. 30.09.1981. No. 1350. 2 p. Archives nationales de Luxembourg (ANLux). <http://www.anlux.lu>. Western European Union Archives. Secretariat-General/Council's Archives. 1954-1987. Foundation and Expansion of WEU. Year: 1981, 01/09/1981-30/06/1982. File 132.18. Volume 1/2.

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/mitterrand_france_s_view_on_security_and_east_west_relations_from_nouvelles_atlantiques_30_september_1981-en-4326163b-853a-4594-b4ab-a28e97fd14a3.html



Last updated: 25/10/2016

MITTERRAND : FRANCE'S VIEWS ON SECURITY
AND EAST WEST RELATIONS

(A.N.-N.A.) - During his first press conference which took place at the Elysée on 24 September, President Mitterrand made a number of comments relating to security issues.

François Mitterrand said : "France, as a sovereign power, is allied to fourteen partners in the Atlantic Alliance, and it knows its rights and its duties towards them. I want them, too, to know their rights and duties, and that was one of the main useful points of the talks I have had with several leaders of Alliance countries, President Reagan in particular.

With the Soviet Union and the countries of Eastern Europe, France wishes to maintain mutually beneficial relations in keeping with our historical ties and our geographical proximity. I have not forgotten the strong friendship which we formerly had with them. I will try to ensure that that friendship is preserved, and if necessary, strengthened.

But France does not confuse pacifism as a basic postulate with its ultimate end which is peace. It is peace that interests me. And these are the realities that determine French policy.

The debate on arms and arms limitation negotiations should hinge on one fundamental axis : only a balance of power preserves peace. It is for this reason that I have brought the Soviet Union's arms build-up in Europe to the attention of the public. This is why I hope that negotiations will be started, but on a clear basis, without one or other party being able to speculate on the moment to gain the upper hand. It is against this background that France intends to develop its own deterrent strategy whilst remaining loyal to its commitments, in full knowledge of that fact that in the final analysis, when it comes to moments of truth, a great country - like individuals when they face dangers and chances in life - is always accountable to itself."

When questioned about the balance of power between East and West, Mr Mitterrand had the following to say : " France's security relies firstly on its capability to defend itself, and secondly on the quality and swiftness of its alliances.

Here, it is the United States of America who, together with thirteen others, are our alliance, and it is only natural to consider what can strengthen this defensive alliance, which, in spite of our efforts, or at any rate in spite of French efforts, has become a bloc - since I want to see all military blocs disbanded together - and to hope that this alliance has the means of ensuring the security of the West, or its geographical extension at least, and the security of France. If I see any imbalance, then I will take action.

I have been asked a very pertinent question - what is the real truth?

Believe me, I have said everything that may be said about secret, or at least confidential documents which I have in my possession. I have also had sent to me all the relevant documents from abroad.

I have decided to set up a national defence committee to deal with this question : what is the truth, what is the balance of power? Roughly speaking, the following claims are made : The Americans say "The present state of orders means that in 1985 the Soviets' strategic force will be stronger."

To which the Soviets reply : "No, that is not the case, even in Europe there is a balance, at least as regards theatre arms, let us say the tactical nuclear force". They even go as far as to say : "This isn't even true as far as conventional forces are concerned", because, there, everyone knows that the Soviet Union has an immense advantage.

My personal conclusion is that up to 1984-85, the strategic balance in real terms will be maintained, but that afterwards, there is a risk that the balance will tip in the Soviets' favour, and that all American plans, such as they have been worked out by the competent authorities, and such as they will be submitted to the US Senate, will be geared to tipping the balance the other way after 1985-86, bringing about a clear advantage to the Americans around 1990.

But we are losing track here.

What I want to say is that if we have to wait until we know who can shoot the furthest before negotiating, we will never negotiate.

But I am a part of this world and of all the forces chosen by my country, and I have no intention to change. Naturally, I will at least try to ensure that there is no evidence to suggest that it the Soviet Union, actually in 1985 or potentially in 1981, has the means at its disposal to take control of the world in a matter of moments.

I am not attributing any aggressive or bellicose intentions to the Soviet Union. The Soviets are a great people who have suffered great war and strife, and its present leaders lived through that period. I am simply saying that we are approaching a time when there will be a new generation who will not remember that time and that I do not want the mere balance of forces to be out of balance in such a way as to give rise to war.

It is for this reason that I sounded the alarm about the massive build-up of SS-20's.

I hope that steps that are being taken as quickly as possible - as they are in the West - will be followed up just as quickly, i.e. before the end of the year, by negotiations between the powers, who along are capable of starting negotiations not on arms build up but on disarmament.

You might ask : "And what about you, France?". But let's be careful here, things are somewhat different. We, here, are part of Europe. We naturally have strategic and tactical forces. For us, there is no question of crossing the Atlantic. You have what is called "strategic", which can cross the Atlantic, and what is called "tacticals" which does not cross the Atlantic. This is a rough way of putting it, but it is nevertheless true to say.

France wants a deterrent force, and has got it, i.e. we have risen above the level at which there might be doubts about our strength and our commitment.

French territory will be defended against any aggression and by all the means we have at our disposal. Our defence means are not graduated, and, because it would mean going beyond the point at which our defence would collapse, we cannot negotiate on part of our nuclear force. We absolutely refuse to be considered party to the gigantic challenge which has arisen between the superpowers, which is way beyond our means. Here we only intend to be involved in the work of discussing and arranging how disarmament can be brought about and how collective security can be achieved. We will contribute what we can : Paris is a great and beautiful capital, and if people want to make use of it, they will find the best reception for the negotiations on arms limitation to start within a reasonable period of time, which incidentally I have just fixed.

As for the Soviet Union, as I said earlier, the big committee is, of course, to meet, It has already been arranged, and the Minister for Foreign Trade, Mr Jobert, will lead the French delegation, whose members have already been chosen, and which will take part in the big commission meeting in Moscow - in December I think.

We have continued to keep to our commitment and we will be glad to take part in any talks which will enable us to preserve the quality of our relations, and, if possible, to discuss peace terms seriously.

Naturally, we are not very happy about the fact that there are such immensely powerful weapons as SS-20 aimed at us, at Western Europe, which are capable of destroying the whole of the Western military machine from the North of Norway to the South of Italy.

It is only natural that the matter should be discussed, as it is only natural that Israel and the Arab countries should be discussed, that anyone should be discussed.

I would like to finish by saying that France's foreign policy cannot accommodate any "don'ts" from outside. We cannot accept American "don'ts" or Soviet "don'ts" or anyone else's "don'ts". There is no area we place out of bounds for ourselves, if it is within the interests of France and peace that we should be there. We must break away from any set ideas or ways of thinking we have. No-one will tell us what to do, and particularly as far as the neutron bomb is concerned.

You want to set us against the Communist Party. The French Government's policy is the one I have just outlined. Research on the neutron bomb is still continuing in France, and has in fact reached an advanced stage. But it is not being used at the present time, and so we are not producing it. That's all I have to say.

If you have given these matters some thought, you will realise that there is a sort of inconsistency between a strategy of preparing for battle beforehand, and one of using all our nuclear forces together to achieve some object other than the sacred defence of our territory. Still, this in no way prevents France from fulfilling its obligations to its ally."

It will be observed that these last remarks by Mitterrand are in sharp contradiction with what Mr Mauroy said on 14 September before the Institute des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale, namely : "In view of our level of development, it is impracticable to be isolated. We must draw the obvious conclusions, particularly when examining the defence of our borders and their approaches. Aggression against France does not start when an enemy enters French territory." Within the Alliance, there is concern about the apparent difference between these two arguments, since whilst Mr Mauroy (wherever he took his ideas from; Mr Hernu?) seems to accept the idea of the "forward battle", Mr Mitterrand seems to reject this idea in favour of the "isolationist" tradition of General de Gaulle, which was toned down considerably under Giscard d'Estaing.