

The French White Paper Goes Navy Blue

by *Admiral Pierre-François Forissier*

Pierre-François Forissier is Chief of Staff of the French Navy. He describes the maritime aspects of the recent French White Paper and looks at the need for increasing cooperation between Western navies and, in particular, between the French Navy and the Royal Navy.

Alongside space and the virtual information world, the maritime environment offers one of the last three fields with freedom of action on which globalisation relies. The free use of maritime areas constitutes a key point for the development of those nations which need the sea for trade and prosperity. Europe has gradually become aware of its importance, as almost 90% of extra-communities trade is carried out along maritime routes.

Owning the world's second largest maritime area,¹ distributed across every ocean, France must look to the high seas. The fate of our country, just like that of our UK neighbour, is closely related to the freedom and security of the maritime communication routes; they are the lungs of our economy, through which 99% of the French petroleum supplies transit. Our seat on the UN Security Council imposes upon us an active contribution to the preservation of 'the common heritage of humanity'. This situation creates points of agreement between France and the UK, countries that share a common and once stormy maritime history, but which today are being brought back together by the ocean-going vocation of their navies. Since then, our two countries have asserted, by the declaration of St-Malo in 1998, their will to lead the construction of the ESDP in Europe. They are pursuing this ambition within the implementation of the Atalanta Operation in the Indian Ocean.

The White Paper

The recent French White Paper has just specified the French defence and national security policy. Compared to the pre-existing one dating from 1994, its approach associates those two state functions, and enables a better consideration of the maritime mission, firstly global, and then broken down into each strategic aspect.

Deterrence

The opacity of the submarine areas, which provides cover even from observation satellites, makes them ideal for **deterrence**. Considering their limited signature and the striking range of their weapons, submarines enable all-round deterrence capabilities – at all times and anywhere. The

carrier battlegroup also plays a role in deterrence, as its fighter jets are fitted with nuclear weapons. With responsibility for 85% of French nuclear warheads, the French Navy will continue to be the leading deterrent actor, as the French President reminded it in Cherbourg during the launching of the SSNB *Le Terrible* earlier this year.

Intelligence and Anticipation

Facing the uncertainties of the world, the White Paper instituted a whole new strategic function – **intelligence** and **anticipation**. It is indeed vital for our leaders to gain intelligence in order to choose the right option from several. If the importance of those intelligence-gathering devices is indeed highlighted, the naval forces contribute to this function very significantly as well, with the capability of observing maritime flows and following maritime activities of all kinds, both legal and illegal.

Using the freedom of traffic, military ships can achieve presence and conduct, over long periods, intelligence-gathering around crisis zones, without any prior diplomatic agreements or any particular political consequences. Some intelligence-gathering operations can only be implemented from the sea via discreet assets, like nuclear submarines. Finally, at sea or ashore, maritime patrol aircraft and commandos can be very efficient intelligence-gathering assets.

Protection

The **protection** of the population and of French territory on a daily basis is at the heart of the defence and security strategy.



SSNB Le Terrible was launched last year. The French Navy has responsibility for 85% of French nuclear warheads [Marine nationale/Mickael Bedart]

For a few years, the Navy has been developing the concept of maritime safeguard, which covers all operations conducted by the Navy to:

- Fight against threats using the sea to carry out illegal activities (narco-trafficking, piracy, terrorism, illegal immigration, etc.).
- Defend our sovereign rights at sea (protection of the marine environment, fishery and pelagic resources).
- Monitor and manage the risks related to maritime activities (assistance at sea, pollution, etc.).

These operations combine naval assets with those of other national organisations, coordinated by the Prime Minister, through the Secretariat Général de la Mer, the maritime prefects or governmental delegates for overseas territories. The cooperation between various ministries (justice, home office, immigration, defence, etc.) enables forces to operate without barriers, and yet reduce the number of naval and airborne assets required. The effectiveness of this approach, which is comparable to an inter-ministries coast-guarding function, has aroused interest from our European neighbours.

Prevention

With the increase in maritime traffic and the just-in-time methods, an interruption of our supplies and those of other European Union members could directly and brutally affect our strategic, even vital, interests. Within the frame of **prevention**, the White Paper takes into account the necessity to be present on the main maritime routes, and to fight trafficking where it originates.

The White Paper thus defines a priority main line, which recommends concentrating our efforts from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, with some possible extension toward Asia. This crisis arch is built on both sides of the main maritime route, along which most of our supplies reach us. Acts of piracy off Somalia confirm the accuracy of this strategic analysis.

The relevance of our permanent naval presence in the Indian Ocean for decades is equally underpinned. The increase in operational cooperation with the British is supported as well, notably with the reciprocal participation during the deployment of French or British Task Forces in this particular region of the world.

Intervention

When prevention cannot contain a growing crisis regarding our interests, **intervention** then becomes necessary. The intervention usually combines Joint task forces, and will more frequently take place within a coalition.

Action at sea or from the sea to the shore varies regarding the phase of engagement. During the initial phase, a credible threat can be maintained in the time that an embargo, possibly a blockade, can be set. Then, considering the intensity of the crisis, it would be possible to conduct either

airborne strikes from an aircraft carrier, or to discreetly land Special Forces personnel, or to operate naval tactical/cruise missiles from a submarine or a frigate. It could also be necessary to evacuate national citizens or to land troops. The arrival of two new command and control ships (LHD *Mistral* and *Tonnerre*) reinforce very strongly the projection capacities of our land forces. The action from the sea will mainly consist of providing logistics supplies, technical or medical, for airborne and land operations.

Regular engagements of the carrier group in the Indian Ocean since 2001 have been a part of this projection of power to a theatre of operations. In this field, the postponement of the decision to build a second aircraft carrier in 2011–2012 will be used to deepen the studies related to the choice of propulsion.

The success of all these missions depends on prior local management of maritime areas. The supremacy at sea of western countries is questioned again by numerous states equipped with modern and high-seas navies capable of asserting their power.

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Quality v. Quantity

It is nevertheless essential to pursue the renewal of our high-seas-capable assets, the average age of which is 21 years. The modernisation of these assets, combined with the implementation of European multi-missions frigates (FREMM) and the *Suffren*-class nuclear attack submarines, will enable deterrent, prevention or intervention operational missions.

In a world where risks of conventional war at sea have decreased, the emergence of new naval powers, equipped with airborne or submarine assets, requires us to keep efficient fighting assets in quality and quantity, able to control all types of situations.

Nevertheless, the general decrease in the numbers of frigates will preclude the possibility of employing them for maritime security purposes anymore, even though such missions can be carried out by basic high-seas-capable assets.

To provide an answer to the increasing needs of protection – that is to say nearly a third of the Navy activities – the development of high-seas patrol vessels, not too sophisticated, and yet including means of information and



The new command and control ship, LHD Mistral, together with her sister ship Tonnerre, reinforces the projection capability of the French Navy [Marine nationale/Ludovic Picar]

intervention, such as a helicopter or an unmanned vehicle embarked, is fundamental.

Generally, the reduction in numbers of platforms should be compensated by the effectiveness of those available, in terms of availability, time at sea and range of actions. Controlling operating costs would be achieved by standardisation as well as technological and organic enhancements.

Cooperation

As with many other subjects for which Franco–British naval cooperation would be appropriate, the aims and constraints of the global environment are converging on both sides of the Channel. This cooperation could be reinforced through an extension to other European countries equally interested in the development of a common think-tank on maritime capabilities, relying notably on the European Defence Agency. Actually, this cooperation already exists, but European amphibious and airborne initiatives are mainly carried out by France and the UK.

It is also as important to improve our mutual knowledge through a policy of common exchange, education and training. Therefore, a military Erasmus² constitutes an interesting path for consideration.

Conclusion

The White Paper has reinforced the military missions and the ocean-going nature of the French Navy. Now that the course is

set, the next procurement law and the following ones will give concrete expression to this ambition.

Security missions are an important stake. In fact, they condition the ability of the Navy to fulfil the increasing calls for interventions at sea as commanded by the State. These are legitimate requests of security from our fellow citizens. In this light, French and British cooperation in the Channel provides an interesting answer. If the project of a common aircraft carrier has not yet been brought to a successful conclusion, we can note how the fate of our two navies, French and British, is year by year more and more interconnected.

On both sides of the Channel, we can look to the future with more and more shared interests. Today, by leaving the command of the first European naval operation against piracy, Atalanta, in the care of a British admiral, assisted by a French admiral, our cooperation has reached a new milestone that prefigures many others in the years to come. ■

NOTES

¹ The Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of France, together with her overseas departments and territories, is 11Mkm²

² Erasmus is the European programme of student exchange; military Erasmus is the equivalent among the European military academies, launched last November