

**ACTOR PREFERENCES, DOMESTIC POLITICS AND
COHABITATION:
THE FRENCH DECISION TO RESUME NUCLEAR TESTING
IN 1995**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	p. 3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	p.11
Chapter 3: Historical Background	p.18
From the Nuclear Doctrine to a Test Moratorium	
3:1 De Gaulle's Nuclear Doctrine	
3:2 Mitterrand and Nuclear Weapons-tradition or a new Socialist approach?	
3:3 Mitterrand's Test Moratorium: Motivations and Repercussions	
Chapter 4: Actor Preferences, Semi-Presidential Regimes and Cohabitation: A Theoretical Framework	p. 25
Chapter 5: The French Decision to Resume Testing	p.31
5:1 Actor Preferences	
5:1:1 Chirac and the Gaullist Legacy	
5:1:2 Left-Right Ideology and Domestic Actors	
5:1:3 Chirac and the Decision to Resume Testing	
5:2 Semi-Presidential Regime and the Role of Cohabitation	
Chapter 6: Conclusion	p.58
Bibliography	p.64

Chapter 1

Introduction

The end of the Cold War brought about significant changes across the European continent in terms of defense and security policies pursued by these nations. In France, François Mitterrand signaled this change by imposing a nuclear test moratorium to show support for the control of nuclear arms and proliferation. However, the possession of nuclear arms and nuclear deterrence has been a fundamental aspect of French defense and security policy since the presidency of General Charles de Gaulle (President 1958-1969). The *force de frappe* (the striking force or the French nuclear force) remained, for the duration of the Cold War, the focus of the French military and national security. On April 8, 1992 President François Mitterrand committed France to a nuclear weapons test moratorium. This act was a monumental departure from the tradition Gaullist reliance on the *force de frappe* as a symbol of France's independence from security alliances like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). As a result of this decision, Mitterrand came under intense criticism from the minority opposition and members of the military-industrial complex for compromising French independence by linking it to that of other states.

In light of these events and the impending negotiation of a new Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1995, French officials decided to resume nuclear testing in the South Pacific at the Mururoa Atoll near Tahiti, a French territory. According to experts, the series of tests were designed to serve three purposes: 1) to complete development of the TN-75 warhead for use on submarine-launched ballistic missiles, 2) to help design and develop computer simulation techniques once a test-ban treaty is officially signed, and 3)

to verify the safety of triggers in older warheads.¹ Yet, one still wonders, after Mitterrand's commitment to a test moratorium, the approaching NPT ratification to which France had already committed itself, and the widespread disapproval of testing domestically and internationally why the French would choose to resume testing. My thesis question will be posed as follows: What motivated the French decision to resume nuclear tests in the South Pacific during the period from September 5, 1995 to January 27, 1996? This thesis will not only discuss the period in which the actual tests took place but will also examine the events that led to this decision which can be traced to the end of the Cold War. It is necessary to examine prior events, such as Mitterrand's nuclear test moratorium that began in 1992 as well as the importance of the presidential elections of 1995 to fully comprehend the motivations behind this decision.

When responding to the question of why the testing began in 1995 one must examine the domestic events that prompted France to abandon its previous commitment to a test ban. On the domestic level, 1995 was a very important year in French politics. The French presidential elections took place April 23 and May 7, 1995 and François Mitterrand, the Socialist president from 1981-1995 was not seeking another term due to his deteriorating health. Ultimately, Jacques Chirac, the former mayor of Paris and head of the *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR), a neo-Gaullist right-wing party won the election. The parties on the right (RPR and *Union pour la démocratie française* (UDF), a coalition of the center-right) had already won the majority in the National Assembly in 1993, causing a period of "cohabitation" where the President and the majority in the National Assembly belong to different political parties. The political changes that took place from 1992 to 1995 will be central to my argument.

¹ "Test and shout", *The Economist*, September 9, 1995

Other scholars have chosen to explain Chirac's decision by claiming that he was motivated by a desire to distinguish himself from Mitterrand or that he wanted to celebrate the grandeur of France with a series of nuclear explosions. The French government said that it was to assert the credibility of the weapons in the face of threats from rouge states. One author even claimed that it was the result of France's desire to reassert its authority in the South Pacific. However, in light of the available information, these explanations prove to be inadequate.

My first explanation exposes the different actor preferences that contributed to the final decision to test. These preferences are divided into three subsections each exploring different actor preferences and influences. The first subsection examines the long-standing military and political reliance on the French nuclear deterrent as a justification of French independence from security alliances. General Charles de Gaulle, president of the Republic from 1958 to 1969 made the nuclear deterrent the focal point of French security and defense policy. His defense principles have guided French politicians since the 1960s and are particularly pertinent to Chirac who is the spokesman for the RPR neo-Gaullist party. In this explanation, we will look at how Chirac's Gaullist heritage influenced his extended support of nuclear testing and ultimately his presidential nuclear policy. In August 1995, Chirac stressed the importance of nuclear weapons in deterring attacks by non-conventional arms. David Yost claims that the "French rationale to retain deterrent resides in France's relatively limited conventional military forces."² It implies therefore that a strategy less reliant on deterrence would lead to greater dependence on coalition action primarily with the United States. France is loath to become the "lieutenant of Uncle Sam."

The second subsection looks at left-right ideology and the formation of preferences amongst military and civilian advisors. In July 1993 Mitterrand and Prime Minister Edouard Balladur (RPR) announced the creation of a team of military and scientific experts called the Lanxade group to assess the effects of a test moratorium on the French nuclear weapons program. In a secret report to Balladur (leaked in part to the French newsmagazine, *L'Express*) Lanxade argued that the moratorium could continue until the presidential elections in 1995 but thereafter, it would be imperative to conduct a series of twenty tests. On October 28 the National Assembly established a defense commission of six deputies (three RPR, two UDF, and one Parti Socialiste) under the direction of René Galy-Dejean to investigate whether France could rely on computer simulations to test its nuclear weapons. The report stated that France needed to resume testing to assist in the development of simulation technology for the PALEN program (Préparation à la limitation des Essais Nucléaires—Preparation for the limitation of nuclear tests). Mitterrand himself faced serious internal criticism from the military, the Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique (CEA) and political opponents like the RPR ministers who argued like the Lanxade and the Galy-Dejean commissions that testing was needed to maintain technical capabilities.

The final subsection explanation derives from the preferences of France's primary actor in national defense: the President. Chirac has made statements throughout his political career that he was committed to maintaining and modernizing France's nuclear weapons program. When Mitterrand ordered a moratorium, Chirac was one of the first politicians to publicly condemn his actions. Moreover, during the presidential electoral campaign Chirac confirmed that he was committed to resumption, irrespective

² David Yost, "France's Nuclear Dilemmas," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1996.

of the international climate. Partisan politics play an important role in this explanation. The differences between those who favor “more operational” (more independent, high technology weapons) and those who support “less operational” (*status quo* of the French weapons system) become obvious. David Yost identifies “more operational” with a rightist approach while “less operational” can be described as a leftist, Socialist policy.³

The second explanation examines the role that cohabitation, an institution unique to semi-presidential regimes that arises when a legislature is composed of a majority other than that of the president, played in the final decision to test. This explanation will address the nature of the French semi-presidential regime and how cohabitation or the lack of cohabitation changed the ability of the president or prime minister to enact their policies.

To qualify the second and third subsections, it is necessary to address the problems of partisan politics in the events preceding the announcement of nuclear testing in June 1995. It is also important to look at the process of policy making in France and how institutional factors hinder or complicate that process. I will examine how the complexity of a semi-presidential system that has resulted in cohabitation affects presidential decision making on matters of defense. Process tracing will be an important tool for the first subsection. A proper argument necessitates tracing the history of the French nuclear doctrine from de Gaulle to Chirac, while examining Chirac’s own ties to Gaullism and the influence that de Gaulle’s policies had on his decision. For the second subsection specifically, primary source documents from the Lanxade report and the Defense White Paper will be used.

³ David Yost, ‘Nuclear Weapons Issues in France’, in John C. Hopkins and Weixing Hu (eds), *Strategic Views From the Second Tier: Nuclear Weapons Policies of France, Britain, and China*, San Diego, CA:

Given the magnitude of Chirac's decision and the subsequent virulent reaction from the international community, one would expect to find numerous papers and articles on the topic. Yet, very few scholars chose to address this important event in French military history. When material is published, it frequently addresses the environmental concerns raised from testing in the South Pacific. Consequently, few published articles exist in French and even fewer in English. I will use, predominantly, articles from French and American newspapers and select articles from French nuclear specialists appearing in French and English-language scholarly journals. I also draw my information from a number of books examining French nuclear policies and theory. The majority of the primary source material comes from research done at the Bibliothèque de la Fondation Nationale de Sciences Politiques in Paris and the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. Primary sources are French language only and include electoral and presidential speeches on nuclear policy taken from Chirac and Mitterrand, as well as the published memoirs of various foreign affairs ministers who served under these presidents.

The importance of this research is multi-faceted. Firstly, very little is written about the French nuclear capabilities aside from grouping them into an analysis of the major powers possessing nuclear weapons. I see this as a tremendous oversight on the part of academia because besides Britain, France is the only other European country that has a deterrent capability. During the Cold War and in the post Cold War period the discussion of French nuclear policy in English has remained largely neglected except a few monumental works published in the 1970s.⁴ In English-language literature on the subject, the United States and Britain are naturally the focus of analysis. A discussion of

Institute on Global Conflict and Global Cooperation, University of California, San Diego, 1994, pp. 19-104
⁴ See Wilfred Kohl, *French Nuclear Diplomacy*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971

French nuclear policies, often overshadowed by American relations with Britain, will bring this topic to a wider English-speaking audience. Secondly, the renewed testing marked a radical departure from the previous French stance on nuclear testing in the post-Cold War era and deserves to be treated and examined in its entirety. While many articles make reference to Chirac's decision, few examine his motivations. Finally, I believe that this thesis will indirectly address other questions about the nature of French defense policy, the importance the country places on independence and also the reasons behind why it has always been so reluctant to join security alliances such as NATO.

The subsequent chapters of my thesis will serve to expand upon the information outlined in the introduction. In chapter two I will present a series of alternative explanations and a discussion of the relative merits and inadequacies of their arguments. Chapter three serves as a brief historical introduction to French politics. I will first discuss French nuclear doctrine and the role of General de Gaulle. An understanding of the nature of the doctrine and the role of de Gaulle in its creation is imperative. The chapter continues with a review of François Mitterrand's nuclear policy from 1981 until the end of his second mandate in 1995, including a discussion of his historic decision to issue a nuclear weapons test moratorium.

The fourth chapter presents the proper theoretical framework in which to discuss the renewal of nuclear testing. The work of Helen Milner on institutions and preferences as well as the theory of Maurice Duverger on semi-presidential regimes will be explained. Chapter five will be comprised of my explanations, aided by the theoretical framework provided in chapter four and reinforced by numerous empirical examples ranging from primary source documents and quotations from leading French and

American political analysts. The first explanation with its three subsections examines the formation and materialization of actor preferences. It explores the influence of Chirac's Gaullist heritage, the presence of left-right ideology, and Chirac's personal preferences which appear to be derived from a combination of the subsections one and two. Each subsection is organized around its own chronology. The first gives the background of Gaullist defense policy and how it influenced Chirac and other RPR members while the second subsection shows the result of that influence. The final subsection shows Chirac's own nuclear preferences. The second explanation considers the role that the French semi-presidential regime and cohabitation played in the manifestation of these actor preferences into a decision to renew nuclear testing.

In the final chapter I will resume my fundamental arguments, reflect on the validity of these explanations and the persuasiveness of the evidence, and conclude with the implications of my research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review: Alternative Explanations

Chirac's preferences drawn from an allegiance to his Gaullist heritage and the careful preparations of his closest military and civilian advisors coupled with the semi-presidential institution of cohabitation remain the most compelling explanations for the resumption of nuclear testing in 1995. However, there remain other, less persuasive explanations for Chirac's decision. These alternative variables include Chirac's attempt to differentiate himself from Mitterrand upon taking office, France's desire to reassert itself in the South Pacific, and the French government's explanation that testing was needed to dissuade rouge states. The final variable, an explanation supported by Gilles Martinet, a French ambassador, claims that the decision was motivated purely by French pride.

In an opinion piece published September 7, 1995, two days following the first in a series of six nuclear tests, Jean-Marie Colombani, editor of the independent French daily *Le Monde* wrote that Chirac's decision was "participating in a pure logic of internal politics—to symbolically mark the rupture...with François Mitterrand."⁵ On May 5, 1994 Mitterrand stated in a public address that his successor would be constrained by his 1992 decision on a test ban moratorium and that any attempt to do otherwise would be unpopular at home and perhaps more so abroad. Chirac's decision to renew nuclear testing was thought to have been in direct response to Mitterrand's statement. While the statement angered Prime Minister Edouard Balladur and other cabinet ministers it should not be given too much importance.

⁵ Jean-Marie Colombani, "L'erreur", *Le Monde*, September 7, 1995