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Nuclear France: Grandeur or Mirage?

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The major theme of Cold War France's foreign policy was the reassertion of the country's traditional great power identity. France did not aspire to unseat the two superpowers as the most powerful states in the world, but French leaders believed that their country could and should also take a place at the global high table. As Charles de Gaulle memorably put it on the first page of his memoirs, "France cannot be France without greatness."[1]

From the perspective of Cold War-era American international relations theory, France's postwar bid for power was both unrealistic and irresponsible. Unrealistic, because the little French hexagon simply did not have sufficient raw power resources to compete in the new era of continental superpowers. Irresponsible, because as Kenneth Waltz most famously argued, multipolarity is much more dangerous than bipolarity. Multipolarity increases diplomatic complexity and expands the realm of incalculable uncertainty, thus inviting instability and ultimately war.[2] Even though France was incapable of raising itself up as a genuine pole of power, it could still make a lot of mischief.

On the other hand, from the perspective of Cold War-era French international relations theory, France's postwar bid for power was both realistic and responsible. Realistic, because modern technology—and above all, nuclear energy—was a force multiplier that could render moot the traditional national power parameters of land area and population size. Responsible, because as the French sociologist Raymond Aron argued, bipolar systems are actually more dangerous than multipolar ones: "Lacking a 'third man,' whether arbitrator or contributor, the two great powers are perpetually in conflict, directly or through intermediaries."[3] The bipolar condition also easily lends itself to a black-white ideologization of conflicts, a stimulus toward total war. Furthermore, beyond the question of stability, Aron stressed that bipolarity is more *unjust* than multipolarity. In bipolarity, all states must choose one of the two camps on pain of death; and then, having chosen their camp, they are mercilessly regimented and exploited by their so-called "ally." By contrast, the

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[1] Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs*, v. 1: *The Call to Honour, 1940-1942* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), 3.

[2] Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), esp. ch. 8.

[3] Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017 [1966]), 139.

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looser alliances in multipolarity permit the weaker partners to retain policy flexibility and to demand tolerance of their cultural and political differences. Thus, France's politics of grandeur, egoistic though it surely was, could also bring positive externalities for other states in international society.

As noted above, France's postwar ambitions rested fundamentally on the big bet that its leaders made on bringing the nuclear revolution to fruition. In addition to clearly opting for a nuclear weapons program from late 1954 on, France strongly promoted civil nuclear energy at home and abroad as the basis for its economic resurgence, and it opulently financed research in nuclear science and medicine to enhance its soft power. These three prongs of French nuclear policy were mutually reinforcing. France relied even more on its nuclear achievements after the 1954-62 Algerian War dealt a lethal blow to its colonial empire, the traditional gauge and emblem of global power. Even today, a relatively diminished France continues to double down on its postwar nuclear bet.[4]

In short, the history of France's nuclear adventure (or adventurism?) is not just another single-country case. It can inform our understanding of the entire Cold War, and even of international relations in general. Yet the French case has not received the attention it deserves in the English language IR and international history literatures. The new special issue of the journal *Cold War History* starts to fill this gap. These are five fascinating, deeply researched, and neatly interlocking papers on a wide range of topics in French nuclear history and politics.[5]

First, Benoît Pelopidas and Sébastien Philippe's "Unfit For Purpose: Reassessing the Development and Deployment of French Nuclear Weapons (1956-1974)" cracks open normally off-limits archival holdings to contest reigning assumptions about France's Cold War nuclear posture. Pelopidas and Philippe conclusively demonstrate that France did not have a credible "*tous azimuts*" military nuclear deterrent force until the mid-1970s. Instead, they argue that de Gaulle's *force de frappe* is better described— borrowing Vipin Narang's theoretical terminology, while falsifying Narang's empirical claims[6]— as a "catalytic" nuclear posture that was intended "to force or trigger the United States to use nuclear weapons to defend Europe against the Soviet Union."[7] Pelopidas and Philippe further argue that the French theory of nuclear deterrence that justified this posture was developed post hoc, after the state had already made its budgetary and technological choices. The theory's major exponent, General (ret.) Pierre Gallois, was head of sales at Dassault, the big French defense contractor. The authors conclude that de Gaulle's impatience with technical details and his motivated bias to

[4] Benoît Pelopidas, "The French Nuclear Idiosyncrasy: How it Affects French Nuclear Policies towards the United Arab Emirates and Iran," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 25:1 (2012):143-169.

[5] The same issue of the journal also contains an additional paper on nuclear history that is not reviewed here: Leonardo Bandarra, "From Bonn with Love: West German Interests in the 1975 Nuclear Agreement with Brazil," *Cold War History* 21:3 (2021) [hereafter, *CWH*]: 337-355.

[6] Vipin Narang, *Nuclear Strategy in the Modern Era: Regional Powers and International Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

[7] Benoît Pelopidas and Sébastien Philippe, "Unfit for Purpose: Reassessing the Development and Deployment of French Nuclear Weapons (1956-1974)," *CWH*: 243-260, here, 247; DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2020.1832472.

believe in French greatness allowed self-serving bureaucrats to create a nuclear mirage while amassing money and power for themselves.

Second, three papers in the special issue focus on France's Cold War-era international nuclear cooperation. In "Nuclear Reach: Uranium Prospection and the Global Ambitions of the French Nuclear Programme, 1945-65," Matthew Adamson draws on historical archives in France and at the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] to show how the *Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique* [CEA] used uranium mining to enter the nuclear big leagues. At first, France's global hunt for uranium was driven by its anticipated domestic demand for what were widely perceived to be rare ores. By 1958, however, "the CEA intended to be both buyer and seller of uranium, just as it intended more generally to be a force in the global nuclear trade."[8] It sent its agents to participate in IAEA technical missions as a cover for promoting this commercial interest. Echoing a point made by Pelopidas and Philippe, Adamson stresses that "it would be mistaken to take this approach to be a Gaullist grand design—rather, it reveals the autonomy of the CEA."[9]

Anna Konieczna's "Nuclear Twins: French-South African Strategic Cooperation (1964-1979)" takes the story of France's international nuclear cooperation beyond the period covered by Adamson. Konieczna provides clear evidence from French and South African archives that "in pursuance of the 'uranium for technology and weapons deal,' France laid the foundations of a South African nuclear weapons programme."[10] Neither side had joined the NPT, so they were legally free to make that deal, although France made sure that its assistance flew under the international radar. More specifically, the French provided extensive secret consulting services for South Africa's uranium enrichment plant construction projects during the mid-1970s, as well as its ballistic missile design efforts and other relevant technologies. In return, France got up to half of South Africa's uranium production at a below-market price. Konieczna finds that the CEA was the main driver of these ever-closer ties with the South African apartheid state, but also that French presidents from de Gaulle to Valéry Giscard d'Estaing understood and supported the arrangement "as long as it remained secret and did not challenge the commercial and competitive positions of French technology providers."[11]

Jayita Sarkar's "From the Dependable to the Demanding Partner: The Renegotiation of French Nuclear Cooperation with India, 1974-1980" shows that France's nuclear relations with India during the 1970s were significantly rockier than its cordial nuclear cooperation with South Africa. The difference was caused by India poking its head above the parapet and conducting a "peaceful nuclear explosion" test in 1974. Having long enjoyed robust nuclear cooperation with the Indian Department of Atomic Energy, the CEA foolishly sent a congratulatory telegram. Such a blatant endorsement of nuclear proliferation was unacceptable to the new Giscard presidency and the French foreign ministry. After a summit meeting with U.S. President Gerald Ford in Martinique, Giscard agreed to participate in the new Nuclear Suppliers Group, whose purpose was to

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[8] Matthew Adamson, "Nuclear Reach: Uranium Prospection and the Global Ambitions of the French Nuclear Programme, 1945-65," *CWH*: 319-336, here, 329; DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2020.1806238.

[9] Adamson, "Nuclear Reach," 335.

[10] Anna Konieczna, "Nuclear Twins: French-South African Strategic Cooperation (1964-1979)," *CWH*: 283-300, here, 286; DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2020.1823968.

[11] Konieczna, "Nuclear Twins," 299.

stop countries like France from touting weak nonproliferation safeguards as a commercial selling point. However, the CEA and the Gaullist Prime Minister Jacques Chirac opposed Giscard's "willingness to participate in the NSG as French capitulation to US domination."[12] With Chirac providing air cover, the CEA and its allies not only pressed on with their wide-ranging nuclear cooperation with India, but also boldly signed new contracts to provide entire fissile material production plants to Pakistan and South Korea. But then Chirac's resignation in 1976 allowed the foreign ministry to swiftly move in and present India with tough new nonproliferation safeguards demands, while also causing the abandonment of the French contracts with Pakistan and South Korea. India ultimately saved its nuclear freedom of action with the threat to switch over to cooperation with the Soviet Union, which caused not only the French, but also even the Americans to relent.

Last, Valerie Arnhold's "Normalisation of Nuclear Accidents after the Cold War" describes France and the world's move toward a standard regulatory and knowledge framework for nuclear reactor accidents after the 1979 Three Mile Island core meltdown incident in the U.S. and the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in the USSR. Although those high-profile events forced it to admit that serious civil nuclear accidents were a possibility, the bulk of the French nuclear estate continued to resist the growing international norm of establishing clear institutional independence of nuclear safety regulatory authorities. It was only in 2006 that the institutions of nuclear energy promotion and nuclear safety regulation were finally separated in French law. By that time the French public had soured on nuclear energy, Green Party politicians held key ministerial portfolios, and the EU was imposing the independent safety regulator norm on new member-states as part of the *acquis communautaire*. The legislation came just in time to achieve what Arnhold terms the "containment of political conflict" over France's nuclear dependence after the 2011 Fukushima nuclear plant disaster in Japan.[13]

The combined findings from the five papers in this special issue suggest some tentative general hypotheses on the broader historical debate over France's international role. First, the papers collectively give strong implicit support to the standard Waltzian/American IR interpretation of the Gaullist pursuit of multipolarity as detrimental to international stability—but only modestly so, because France did not have sufficient resources to turn its dream into reality. There are some French fingerprints on the South African and Indian bombs, but French help was neither necessary nor sufficient to those outcomes, and in any case neither country made it out of the "bomb in the basement" stage until the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, France's own nuclear weapons appeared irrelevant to the superpowers, its attempt to lead the global resistance against the NPT quickly fizzled, and its long quest for nuclear contracts with developing countries bagged few big prizes. Despite the Gaullist sound and fury, the international system remained firmly bipolar up until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Second, the papers collectively call into question the standard image of France as a rational unitary-actor state pursuing national security, power, and welfare under the leadership of a strong chief executive. Instead, the CEA and its allies in politics, business, and the military are portrayed as a democratically unaccountable state

[12] Jayita Sarkar, "From the Dependable to the Demanding Partner: the Renegotiation of French Nuclear Cooperation with India, 1974-1980," *CWH*: 301-318, here, 312; DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2019.1694908.

[13] Valerie Arnhold, "Normalisation of Nuclear Accidents after the Cold War," *CWH*: 261-281, here, 277; DOI: 10.1080/14682745.2020.1806239.

within the state that routinely endangered international security and domestic safety in search of a quick buck. This is an important finding with implications far beyond the French case, for if not even France can be reasonably depicted as a unitary actor in foreign policy, then probably no state can.

On the other hand, some of the evidence from these papers supports a less miserable view of France's nuclear adventure. For instance, Pelopidas and Philippe emphasize that the *force de frappe* was "unfit for purpose" until the mid-1970s, but a logical implication of their argument is that the arsenal became "fit for purpose" after that. De Gaulle did not have the nuclear military power that he claimed and perhaps believed he did, but his steady support for the nuclear weapons program ensured that his successors did have that power. Whether the technical achievement ultimately made France any safer is a separate question. Moreover, although at times the CEA may have seemed on the verge of becoming a runaway bureaucracy, ultimately French politics was able to reassert a conception of the general interest in nuclear policymaking. The robust bureaucratic autonomy that the CEA long enjoyed does not contradict the Weberian legal-rational state model; to the contrary, such autonomy is the necessary institutional basis for it.[14]

As for the diplomatic side, the international cooperation papers coincidentally reveal that France used its nuclear expertise to get in on the ground floor with Brazil (a case that is extensively discussed in Adamson's paper), India, and South Africa—the three non-Communist members of today's "BRICS" [Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa] club of rising powers. Taking the very long view, were these not wise investments? France's global nuclear diplomacy also measurably enhanced its power position vis-à-vis the superpowers even at the time. For example, Sarkar notes in passing that when New Delhi appeared to be close to defecting to the Soviet Union to get the nuclear fuel that the U.S. was refusing to supply, the Carter administration pinned its hopes on the French to keep the Indians onside.[15] What this anecdote suggests is that France's more emollient approach to the developing world at least sometimes bailed out the West from the negative consequences of America's overly ideological tendencies. Putting these disparate points together, perhaps the French IR theory perspective on France's Cold War is not so wrong after all.

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[14] For a theoretical exposition of this point, see Jacques E. C. Hymans, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), esp. ch. 2.

[15] Sarkar, "From the Dependable to the Demanding Partner," 316.