



‘Without taboos’: France’s new defense policy

Olivier Debouzy, one of the authors of the *French White Paper on Defence and National Security*, reflects on its key recommendations and the rationales behind them.

Philippe Cothier

Soon after taking office in May 2007, French President Nicolas Sarkozy established a commission to take a hard look at France’s defense and national security policy. In June 2008, this commission published the *French White Paper on Defence and National Security*, the first official statement of French defense policy since 1994. In the paper, the commission says it was given “full latitude to fulfill its task, without any taboos.” The French government has begun incorporating the *White Paper’s* recommendations into its planning and spending decisions.

In a departure from prior commissions, the 2007–08 White Paper Commission consisted not only of government officials but also of academics, industry representatives, and other

external experts. Among those appointed to the White Paper Commission was Olivier Debouzy, a lawyer and a former diplomat. Debouzy held various posts in the French diplomatic service, specializing in nuclear military affairs and strategy, from 1985 to 1991. In 1993 he became an attorney and two years later cofounded the full-service law firm August & Debouzy, which now has more than 130 lawyers.

In November 2009, McKinsey partner Philippe Cothier interviewed Debouzy in Paris about the highlights of the *White Paper*. Excerpts of the conversation follow.

McKinsey on Government: *It is rather unusual in France to have lawyers participating in national security debates. To my knowledge, the*



2007–08 Defence and National Security White Paper Commission was the first to include lawyers—two of them, actually, of which you are one. Why do you think President Sarkozy appointed you?

Olivier Debouzy: I do not claim to know President Sarkozy’s motivations, but I have been active in defense and national security debates for the past 28 years, first in the government and then outside it. More generally, I think President Sarkozy wanted to have a diverse array of minds thinking about the issues we are confronting, which is why he chose to appoint to the White Paper Commission military and civil servants as well as outside experts such as myself.

McKinsey on Government: *How would you describe the commission’s purpose?*

Olivier Debouzy: Without betraying the confidentiality of the White Paper Commission’s deliberations, I can say that when we first met with President Sarkozy in August 2007, he was very clear: he said to us that the French defense and national security policy should be analyzed without regard to any taboos or preconceptions, and that our recommendations should be as bold as we thought necessary. I think we fulfilled that mission. We certainly had debates up to the very end of the drafting of the White Paper. The chairman of the White Paper Commission, Jean-Claude Mallet, kept President Sarkozy apprised of our work on a regular basis, and he never limited our freedom of thought and of proposition.

McKinsey on Government: *What do you think are the main innovations of the White Paper?*

Olivier Debouzy: I shall try to be concise, but this is obviously a big question. The first

innovation is reflected in the scope of the White Paper Commission’s mission. Previous White Papers had been exclusively about defense, but this one is about defense and national security. What does that mean? In the 20 years since the fall of the Berlin Wall, defense and national security have been integrated into a continuum. In the age of globalization, there are few threats that are exclusively external or internal. For instance, terrorism, which used to be linked much more closely to the local stakes of a given territory (think ETA in the Spanish Basque region or the IRA in Northern Ireland), is now global, in large part due to the increasing mobility of populations and the massive presence of minorities in Western societies. Another reason for this continuum is the evolution of technology and the globalization of the unofficial arms trade, which have resulted in highly destructive means being available to terrorist groups which, 20 years ago, would have been able to obtain such means only if they were backed by states.

At the same time, the post–Cold War world is a world where the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and even Germany are waging wars. We have not seen that since 1945. Nuclear deterrence is no longer enough; the need for more robust, better-equipped, better-trained, and better-serviced conventional forces has never been so pressing.

All this led the White Paper Commission to reconsider the fundamental paradigms of French defense and national security policy and to establish five priorities, the first of which is knowledge and anticipation. In the days of the Cold War, we knew who the enemy was. Intelligence was mostly about discovering things that the Soviet Union wanted to hide from us. Today and in the foreseeable future,

the scope of knowledge and anticipation will expand to cover who our enemies are, what they are planning, and where and how they will attack us. The technical aspect of intelligence served us well during the Cold War, but we now have to add a strengthened human intelligence component.

In addition, the nature of knowledge- and anticipation-related activities has changed. In the age of the Internet, most of the intelligence is available on the Web. Secret intelligence covers a much-reduced if still crucial scope. Intelligence in the form of “weak signals” out in the open needs to be analyzed carefully, as it might be predictive of threats on which secret intelligence will then have to focus. Similarly, cultural, religious, and linguistic knowledge may prove decisive in understanding diplomatic moves and future or emerging threats and in adequately preparing diplomatic initiatives, internal security policies, or military moves.

Knowledge and anticipation are force multipliers. Without them, one wastes time and money preparing for the wrong kind of operations, in the wrong region, and against the wrong people. We’re not looking only for intelligence; we’re

looking to mobilize intelligent people to achieve better security at home and abroad.

McKinsey on Government: *What does this mean with regard to technological investments in such areas as space observation, early detection, unmanned aerial vehicles, cyber intelligence, and so on?*

Olivier Debouzy: The LPM [Loi de Programmation Militaire, the 2009–14 defense equipment bill], which the French Parliament recently passed, reinforces the priority of such technological investments, consistent with the recommendations of the White Paper Commission. More than ever, we need both technical and human intelligence.

The second priority is protection. The need to organize protection is based on a concept that our British friends have developed and formalized—that of resilience. Our societies are complex, and their architecture is only as solid as their weakest part. In addition to the strengthening of the internal intelligence agency, the *White Paper* recommends—through energetic action of public authorities and the development of a special kind of public-private partnerships, so to



speak—better organization of the capacity of French society to withstand systemic shocks. And these shocks include not only terrorism but also pandemics and industrial catastrophes, since the means required to treat them are largely similar. The fulfillment of this objective requires not so much more money, but rather a different way to spend it and a reorganization of the way the state works, both internally and with the private sector (for example, telecommunications operators, utilities, food supply logistics, and so on).

One should be careful to avoid restricting civil liberties in efforts to provide better protection to the people. The White Paper Commission was particularly conscious of this and organized several hearings with foreign experts. Obviously, you don’t want to impinge on people’s freedoms and on their ability to live normal lives; protecting them at that cost is just not worth it. A delicate balance has to be struck.

The third priority is deterrence, which remains a fundamental dimension of the French security paradigm. Its implementation, however, may differ from what it has been in the past. For instance, as President Sarkozy has said, antiballistic missile (ABM) defenses can—and, in all likelihood, will—play a useful role as a complement and reinforcement to our offensive deterrent capabilities. At the same time, no effort and money will be spared to ensure that the capability of our weapons to penetrate other countries’ ABM defenses remains intact and even improves.

The fourth priority is intervention. The French, like the British and the Americans, have kept alive a strong tradition of intervention abroad during the past 40 years. But they cannot intervene anywhere and everywhere;

choices have to be made. Intervention now is directed toward a strategic axis going from Rabat [Morocco] to Dhâkâ [Bangladesh], or, if you prefer, from Dakar [Senegal] to Peshawar [Pakistan]. This strategic axis is that of the “arc of crisis” where most conflicts can directly threaten Western interests.

Because of the technological evolutions we spoke of a moment ago, the nature of conventional war is changing. The American experience in Iraq was watched and analyzed closely by our military. Similarly, the Afghan war is teaching the French very useful lessons about the wars of the future and the equipment needed to fight them. Joint forces operations; generic equipment easily adaptable to a variety of environments; giving up gold-plating in favor of robustness and simplicity of use; intelligent exploitation of available civil technologies; emphasis on training, maintenance, and readiness—these are the priorities that should be implemented to be able to effectively intervene abroad, in a world characterized by growing instability.

Last, the White Paper Commission put the emphasis on prevention by recommending a restructuring of French bases abroad, the updating of existing defense agreements, and the signing of new ones. The first result of this reorientation of policy was the status-of-forces agreement signed between France and the United Arab Emirates in 2009.

McKinsey on Government: *A few years ago you published an article in the Revue de Défense Nationale that called on France to make some hard choices. Would you say that the 2008 White Paper makes those choices at last?*

Olivier Debouzy: Indeed, the White Paper Commission made some very difficult choices and

recommendations on several issues: the definition of strategic priorities; the reorganization of the Ministry of Defence and the improvement of procurement, training, and support; the reorganization of the internal intelligence agencies; the basing of French forces abroad and in overseas territories; and the reorganization of the French defense industry. These are being implemented as we speak, albeit some more slowly than others.

McKinsey on Government: *Let's talk about one of the issues you just mentioned—the reorganization of the Ministry of Defence. What do you think the White Paper's impact will be on that?*

Olivier Debouzy: The *White Paper* exercise was conducted in parallel with the *Revue générale des politiques publiques* (RGPP), which aims to rationalize the ways in which the state is managed. How do the two converge? I think three areas of focus are worth noting.

The first is improving the tooth-to-tail ratio of the French armed forces. Today, many in the armed forces are the “tail”—that is, they are employed in logistical and support tasks that could be, except in theaters of operations, outsourced to the private sector, which is more efficient, less costly, and strongly motivated to provide good service. The armed forces should be doing what they do best, which is fighting, and preparing to fight as well as they can. So in the coming years, there will be a trimming down of ancillary functions. Two evolutions will help in this regard: first, investment in information systems that are now readily available, and second, systematic outsourcing of noncombat functions and equipment used outside theaters of operations. This requires a cultural change in the armed

forces, but I am confident that it can be implemented, if only because there is little choice. Also, the LPM that I mentioned earlier represents a major breakthrough in the French budgetary tradition in that for the first time, the Ministry of Defence benefits from the economies it achieves—savings will be 100 percent reinvested in equipment and training. Quite an incentive, don't you agree?

McKinsey on Government: *Indeed. What does the White Paper recommend with regard to improving the efficiency of defense acquisition?*

Olivier Debouzy: The second area of focus addresses this point: rationalizing weapons procurement by making a clear distinction between what is strategic and what is not. The consolidation of the European defense industry is ongoing, at a painfully slow pace. It is a fact of life. Therefore the French have to distinguish between fields and weapons for which they absolutely need to keep French suppliers (what I call vital competences), fields and weapons for which they can cooperate with suppliers based in other EU member states (what I call strategic competences), and fields and weapons that can be bought off-the-shelf in the world market. Once this is done, the restructuring of the French defense industry, which has been hampered by political prejudice and confusion, will be much easier.

The third area of focus is creating an analytical cost-accounting system allowing, in particular, the calculation of the total cost of ownership of weapons systems. At present, the armed forces do not precisely know how they are spending their money: what proportion on purchase, what proportion on maintenance, repair, training, and so on. The White Paper Commission recommended that the existing



Olivier Debouzy

cost-accounting system, which is painfully inadequate, be transformed into a proper one and applied to a wider scope of activities and investments.

McKinsey on Government: *One final question: France has rejoined the integrated military organization of NATO after 40 years of absence. The White Paper clearly advocated it. What consequences will it have?*

Olivier Debouzy: First, it should be noted that the NATO-integrated military organization that we are rejoining is not the one we left in 1969. It is not integrated any more, hardly a military organization anymore (only the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and France are significant military contributors), and the re-thinking of its strategic concept and revamping of its structures are going to be the major tasks of the coming years.

After 1969, France’s military cooperation with NATO and the United States was discreet but nonetheless real. France always remained part of the NATO Air Command and Control System (ACCS); it always retained the pipelines supplying the Central Front troops with oil from its harbors in the Nantes region; and it had uninterrupted exchanges with its military partners in NATO—more specifically, with the United States. Even at the times of the worst possible diplomatic tension, the military link between France and the United States was never broken.

In fact, this “cooperation in hiding” was becoming increasingly untenable on a number of levels. First, diplomatically: how could France reconcile a public stance that at times was virulently

anti-American with the reality of cooperation where it mattered? Let us not be blind to the facts: France is a Western country. We are part of Western Europe, subject to the same threats and the same demographic, economic, diplomatic, religious, and cultural challenges. Second, militarily: the absence of coordination between France and the rest of NATO generated multiple problems of interoperability and of coordination where it mattered most—that is, on the battlefield—and limited the exposure of French officers and soldiers to foreign modes of reasoning, experiences abroad, the exchange of ideas, and the confrontations of strategic and operational modes that being part of a coalition entails.

Another advantage of rejoining NATO is that, on issues such as ballistic-missile defense, there is a debate going on within NATO in which France will be an important participant, if only because it faces the Mediterranean. On this issue and on many procurement questions, being within the integrated military structure may allow France and other Europeans to think together, to caucus, and hopefully to be able to have discussions with the United States in a more organized manner. Ultimately—and this is ironic—it may be through NATO that the Europeans will be able to answer Kissinger’s question: “Who do I call if I want to call Europe?” [o](#)