Introduction

The publication of a defence white paper in March 1994 was evidence that the post-Cold War adaptation of French defence policy had reached a point of intellectual maturity. By 1994 there was considerable agreement about the nature of the post-Cold War security context, the lessons of the Gulf War, the defence and security implications of the Maastricht treaties, the lessons of the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the nature of a new French ‘international mission’, the impact of technical-military developments, and the broad aims and objectives of French defence and security policy. This did not mean that a new consensus had appeared – there remained sharp differences in particular about Franco-NATO relations, nuclear weapons and the defence budget – but it did mean that the post-Cold War ‘champ de bataille’ of the defence debate was becoming clear and that debates inside France were increasingly centring on the detail rather than the broad lines of policy, on means rather than ends, and on the pace rather than the trajectory of change.

The purpose of this chapter is firstly to examine, against the background of changes outlined in the previous chapter, how defence policy was reformed between 1991 and 1994 in the process which culminated in the publication of the 1994 Livre Blanc. The second half of the chapter then discusses the transition from the Mitterrand to the Chirac presidency and brings the reform of defence up to date by examining Chirac’s impact on defence policy, his attempt to resolve the main tensions which remained at the heart of the white paper and the consequences for defence of the election of Lionel Jospin’s Socialist government in the spring of 1997 which opened France’s third period of political cohabitation in little more than a decade.

The defence debate in France 1991–4

To understand the reform of defence it is firstly necessary to say something about the French analysis of the new security context. Much of this begins...

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with the view that since the end of the Cold War France itself, for arguably the first time in its history, faces no direct threats to its frontiers. In the new era France is surrounded by formally allied states [with the exception of the Swiss] each of whom in turn face no direct threats to their respective frontiers [Germany is for example closer to North Africa than to Russia]. Because of this, indirect, latent or future threats have replaced present and direct threats as key determinants of policy with a resultant loss of certainty and predictability and crucially a shift in focus from the present to the future.

France shares much of the Western analysis that Europe in the post-Cold War era is bounded by an eastern and southern flank of instability. To the ‘East’ the dominant issues are the strategic vacuum left by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the potential for Russian revanchism, political and economic instability, nationalism and the potential for civil war for which the break-up of Yugoslavia provides the precedent. To the ‘South’, primarily shorthand for the Mahgreb and Middle East, the issues are centred around population growth and the political, economic and social weakness of the southern states to deal with its consequences; access to strategic resources [particularly oil]; religious [Islamic] fundamentalism; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and transnational threats such as terrorism and drugs. The absence of direct threats to the French state and the shared perceptions of peripheral threats, combined with the integrational implications of the European project, have eroded the French conceptual distinction between national and European interests, thereby rendering irrelevant many of the old debates about national sanctuarisation.

French global interests outside Europe, defined by Jacques Lanxade as: ‘the exercise of sovereignty over the DOM-TOMs; . . . obligations to countries with whom [France] is linked by co-operation and defence accords, notably in Africa; the security of [French] residents abroad (more than 1.5 million); and . . . the responsibilities . . . of [being] a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council’, are determined to be subject to essentially the same range of threats as those on Europe’s eastern and southern flanks and in the new context there is consequently greater overlap than ever between the two European and global elements of French foreign policy.

As a result the old ‘three circles’ construct is being eroded in a context in which the distinction between France and Europe is diminishing and threats to Europe and those in the wider international system are converging. A novel and officially endorsed formula now proposes that the international security désordre may be resolving to one dominated not by east-west nor north–south issues but rather by issues arising from a global stratification into zones riches [rich zones], zones tampons [buffer zones] and zones misérables [poor or wretched zones]. This in turn has paved the way for a conceptual realignment of French military security interests based not on geography but on the thematic nature of threats to French interests.